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A Desperate Deed.

BY ERSKINE BOYD.

CHAPTER I.

ON Tuesday, the 6th day of March, 1882, the day following Ash Wednesday, in the above-mentioned year, five women, belonging to the village of La Jouchere appeared at the police-station of Bougival, a small town near Paris, and situated on the banks of the Seine.

Having asked to see the commissary of police, they informed him that one of their neighbors, a widow called Lerouge, who inhabited singly a detached cottage just on the outskirts of the village, had not been seen by any of its inhabitants for two entire days, and, notwithstanding their repeated endeavors, they had failed to gain admittance.

The shutters being up at each of the windows, and the doors being bolted and barred, they had found it equally impossible to find even a crevice which might have given them a peep at the interior. This strange silence, this sudden disappearance, had caused them great uneasiness, and, fearing a crime, or at the least an accident, they begged that the police would kindly break open the door, and relieve them from their present anxiety.

Bougival is an agreeable sort of place, overflowing on summer Sundays with Paris folk, who have been pent up at the desk or in the counting-house, or kept prisoners behind the counter, on week days. "Small misdemeanors" are of frequent occurrence on these festive occasions; but anything in the shape of crime had hardly ever been heard of. Therefore the commissary of police of this peaceable little town refused at first to accompany his five lady visitors, and somehow pooh-poohed their solicitations. However, finding them to be so evidently in earnest, and seeing no other way to rid himself of their presence, the wearied magistrate at last gave in, and sending for the brigadier of gendarmerie, two police officers and a locksmith set off for the cottage of the Widow Lerouge, the five women leading the way.

La Jouchere is an insignificant hamlet situated on the declivity of a hill, which overlooks the Seine between Malmaison and Bougival. A steep path, unconnected with the embankment and high road, takes you to it by a short cut; but the little procession, with the gendarmes at its head, followed the road by the embankment, and after a sharp walk of about three-quarters of an hour's duration, halted before a habitation of unpretending yet respectable appearance.

The house, or rather cottage, had probably been built by some retired tradesman, fond of "an open view," for all trees had been carefully cut down, and any intrusive ivy or other creeping plant as assiduously banished.

The cottage consisted of two large rooms on the ground floor, with an attic or so above. Around it was a neglected garden, badly protected from marauders by a stone wall of about a yard in height, which in some places was crumbling into ruin. A wicket-gate with an iron latch opened into the garden.

"This is the place," said the women.

The commissary of police stopped at the little wicket-gate, and turned round to his men. During their walk their suite had been considerably increased by all the idlers of the neighborhood, and now consisted of about some forty persons, all in a very inquisitive and talkative condition. "Let no one enter the garden," said the commissary.

And to enforce his orders, he placed the two gendarmes before the gate, while he advanced to the house, accompanied by the brigadier of gendarmerie and the locksmith.

First he knocked loudly with his loaded cane several times at the front door, then at all the shutters. After each blow he placed his ear to

the wood, and listened attentively. Hearing no sound or movement in answer he turned to the locksmith.

"Force the lock," he said.

The workman unfastened his bag and took out his tools. He had just introduced one of his picklocks into the keyhole, when a great uproar burst from the crowd of idlers behind.

A boy, playing with one of his comrades, had picked up a large key in the ditch by the roadside, and, pushed by a dozen officious hands, presented it in triumph to the commissary.

The key, on being tried, was found to be that of the front door; and as it swung back on its hinges, the commissary and the locksmith glanced uneasily at one another.

"This looks suspicious," murmured the brigadier as he entered the house, whilst the crowd, with difficulty held in check by the gendarmes, stamped with impatience, craning their necks and crawling along the wall, in their vain endeavors to see or hear what was going on within.

Those who had suspected foul play were, unfortunately, not deceived in their conjecture, for the practiced eye of the commissary detected the awful presence of crime the moment he placed his foot on the threshold.

The disorder that reigned in the room they entered announced, with a dismal eloquence, the traces of its footsteps. Chairs, tables, a chest of drawers, and two large trunks were overturned and thrown pell-mell on one another.

In the second room the confusion was, if possible, still worse. It seemed as if the hand of a madman had taken a wild pleasure in tossing everything to right and left.

Near the fire-place, her face in the midst of the ashes of the burnt-out logs, lay the corpse of the Widow Larouge; so near, in fact, that one of her cheeks had absolutely been scorched by the heat, and a portion of the long, gray hair consumed, though by some miracle the fire had not communicated with any portion of the unfortunate woman's dress.

"The cowardly dogs!" murmured the brigadier of gendarmerie. "Couldn't they have robbed without murdering the poor woman?"

"But where has she been struck?" asked the commissary. "I don't see any blood."

"Here, sir," answered the gendarme: "just between the shoulders. Two steady blows, and no mistake. I'd wager my next month's pay that she hadn't time to utter even a groan."

He bent over the body and touched it with his hand.

"She's as cold as marble," he continued, as he proceeded with his examination; "and if my experience goes for anything, more than one day and night have elapsed since the poor creature got her death-stroke."

The commissary shrugged his shoulders, and producing his writing implements, placed them on a corner of the table, and proceeded to draw up the necessary judicial report.

"It's no use making long speeches or wasting our time in suppositions," said he to the brigadier; "we can do that when we have discovered the assassins. All we have to do at present is to inform the justice of the peace and the mayor of the facts of the case. The next, to start for Paris, and present this letter at the office of the public prosecutor. Before two hours have elapsed the examining magistrate may be here. In the meantime I will make a provisional inquest, and endeavor to gain some additional evidence."

"Am I to take the letter?" inquired the brigadier.

"No; send one of your men. I shall want you here to keep back the crowd, and find me the witnesses I may require. I shall leave everything as you now see it, and take up my quarters in the front room at present."

A gendarme was at once started for the nearest railway station, and the commissary commenced proceedings according to the law.

Who was this Widow Lerouge? From whence did she come? What was her occupation? How did she live—and upon what? What were her habits—her conduct—her acquaintances? Had she enemies? Was she



CEARA PLEADS FOR HER LOVER.

miserly? Had she money, or was it reported she had money?

These were the inquiries that it was the duty of the commissary of police to make, in pursuance of the French law.

But the witnesses, though numerous, gave but little information.

The depositions of the neighbors were empty, incoherent, and unsatisfactory. Nobody knew anything of the victim; she was an entire stranger to the place. A gardener's wife, who had been friendly with the Widow Lerouge, and a milk-woman, whom she dealt with, were the only people who could give any information of a precise and tangible nature.

At last, after three weary hours of questioning and cross-questioning, after having listened to all the rapid gossip of the village, received the most contradictory evidence, and heard the most ridiculous tittle-tattle, the following contained the only reliable statements gathered after so much difficulty by the commissary of police.

CHAPTER II.

Two years before, at the commencement of 1860, the woman Lerouge had arrived at Bougival with a large van full of furniture, clothes, and other property. She stopped at a small inn, where she took up her quarters for the time being, informed the people that she intended settling in the neighborhood, and at once set about finding a house. This cottage being according to her tastes, she had taken in at the yearly rental of thirty pounds, payable every six months, and in advance, but refused a lease, although offered at more advantageous terms.

The agreement being drawn up, she had entered the same day, after having spent five pounds in repairs.

She was a woman of about fifty-four or fifty-five years of age, well-preserved, and enjoying robust health. Nobody knew why she had settled herself in a place where she was an utter stranger. It was supposed she had come from Normandy, because in the morning she wore linen caps common to the women of that province. This rather homely sort of cap was, however, discarded in the afternoons, when the widow burst into bloom in the shape of very bright-colored dresses, gaudy head-gear, and showy jewelry.

In all probability she had come from some naval port, for allusions to the sea and ships were of constant occurrence in her conversation.

She had a dislike of speaking of her husband, who had died, she said, in a shipwreck; but upon this subject she had never been heard to enter into any detail. Once only she had said to the milkwoman, in the presence of three other persons, "Never was there a woman more unhappy in her married life than I was."

On another occasion she had said, "Novelty alone pleases the men. My husband got tired of me after the first year."

Widow Lerouge had the reputation of being comfortably off, if not rich. She was also generous with her money. Had once lent a woman of Malmaison sixty francs to enable her to pay her rent, and afterwards refused repayment. Another time she had advanced two hundred francs to a fisherman of Port Marly. She loved good living, ordered her wine by the dozen, constantly gave excellent dinners to her friends, and was fond of patronizing them. When complimented on being rich, was never known to deny it. Was often heard to say, "I have nothing in the funds, but I have all I want. If I wished for more, I could have it."

Apart from what has been mentioned above, she never allowed the slightest allusion to escape her concerning herself or her past life. At night she barricaded her house with bolt and bar, as if it had been a fortress, and never went out after sunset. It was said she habitually drank too much at her dinner, and generally went to bed immediately afterwards.

It was very seldom any strangers visited her. Four or five times a lady and a young man were seen to enter the cottage, and on one occasion two gentlemen—one very old, and wearing several orders; the other young and evidently "a great swell." These last had come in a handsome carriage.

A pork-butcher of Bougival, in pecuniary difficulties, had been known to propose marriage to her, but had been summarily dismissed, with the observation that she had had one husband, which was quite sufficient, and that she was by no means disposed to repeat the experiment.

Nevertheless, on several occasions men were seen to call on her. At first, a young man having the appearance of a railway guard; then, a tall, dark, elderly man, dressed in a blouse, and of a sinister and disagreeable aspect. After the incident of the pork-butcher, the village gossips put these men down as the widow's admirers.

Whilst the commissary was collecting this evidence and putting it to paper, the examining magistrate arrived. He brought with him the chief officer of the detective police, accompanied by one of his agents.

Monsieur Daburon, the examining magistrate, was at this time about thirty-eight years of age. In figure he was tall and well made; and, notwithstanding a certain coldness and hauteur in manner, with a gentle and melancholy expression of face. This melancholy had remained indelibly marked on his features after a severe illness which two years before had nearly proved fatal to him.

He had held his present important position since 1859, and had rapidly acquired a brilliant reputation. Hard-working, patient, and endowed with a sort of subtle common sense, he could unravel the most tangled skein in the most puzzling law case, and in the midst of a thousand threads pick out the right one.

With so many rare qualities, he, however, hardly seemed fitted by nature for his terrible office. He

never condemned without a shudder, mistrusting his own judgment, and fearing to be led away in spite of himself by the extent of the authority placed in his hands.

The chief of the detective police was no other than the celebrated Gevrol, who has played so often a prominent part in the criminal dramas of our time. A very able man, with one fault—an obstinate persistency, whether right or wrong, in his own ideas. He never confesses himself wrong, and, the scent once lost, stubbornly refuses to retrace his steps to take up another which a subordinate might have discovered. With this exception, he is the *beau ideal* of a police officer—cool and courageous, gifted with a herculean strength, notwithstanding his meagre appearance, and ever ready to confront a danger, and arrest—often single-handed—the most desperate criminals. But his special peculiarity, his glory, his triumph, is an extraordinary memory for faces. A face once seen by him is never forgotten. In the most unlikely places, under the most incredible disguises, he never fails to recognize it. This remarkable and unerring precision, he explains, is due to his never troubling himself about any other part of a man's face but the eyes. He could remember a glance, or detect a look, when the other features often escaped his memory. To quote an example: A few weeks before the occurrence we are now treating of, a question of identity had arisen concerning three malefactors, accused of a grave offense. Draped with heavy coverings, so as to utterly disguise both height and figure, their faces were hidden by thick veils, in which openings were so managed as to show only their sinister eyes, and in this state they were placed before the keen-visioned detective. Without a moment's hesitation he recognized each of the three rascals, and pointed them out by name.

Gevrol's assistant in the matter he had now in hand was young, but, at the same time, one of the most promising of his staff. Keen as a razor, and loving the profession he had adopted, he saw the one great fault of his master, and never failed, when opportunity offered, to take advantage of it. But Gevrol, on his side, regarded his younger colleague with a jealous disdain.

This agent's name was Lecoq. The commissary of police, who was beginning to feel uneasy at the responsibility of his present position, received the magistrate and the detective officers as a captive receives his liberators. He gave them a rapid recapitulation of the facts, and read the deposition of the various witnesses.

"All this is very satisfactory," said the magistrate; "but there is one fact you have omitted to ascertain."

"And what's that, sir?" inquired the commissary.

"On what day was the Widow Lerouge last seen, and at what time?"

"I was just about to inform you, sir. She was met returning from Bougival on the evening of Shrove Tuesday, with a market-basket on her arm."

"Are you quite sure of the hour?" asked Gevrol.

"Perfectly, and I'll give you the reason why. Two witnesses, whose depositions I have taken—the woman Tellier, and a wine-cooper who lives close by—were getting out of the omnibus that leaves Marly every hour, when they saw the Widow Lerouge crossing the road in front of them. They quickened their pace, and, joining her, walked with her as far as her door."

"And what had she in her basket?" asked the magistrate.

"The witnesses can't say. They only saw the necks of two bottles of wine, each one with a red seal. She complained of a bad headache, and remarked that though it was customary to entertain, and 'keep it up' on Shrove Tuesday, she intended to go to bed directly."

"I've got it!" suddenly interrupted the chief detective.

"What?" said the chief magistrate, eagerly.

"Why, it's clear as the day. We must find out the tall, dark, elderly man in the blouse. The widow expected him to supper—that explains the wine."

"Oh," said the brigadier of gendarmerie, with great disgust, "the widow was old and ugly!"

Gevrol looked with an air of much contempt at the simple-hearted gendarme.

"You don't know the world, my friend, or you'd have known that a woman with money is *always* young and beautiful."

"Perhaps you may be on the track," said the magistrate, reflectively. "But what has struck me the most were those words of the widow—'If I wished for more I could have it.'"

"I must own I was struck by those words also," repeated the commissary.

But Gevrol did not stay to listen. He was on the scent, and was inspecting minutely every hole and corner in the room.

Suddenly he turned towards the commissary.

"I've just remembered," he cried, "that there was a change in the weather on Tuesday. It had been freezing for a fortnight, when it turned to rain. At what time did the rain commence here?"

"At half-past nine," answered the brigadier. "I'd just finished supper, and was going my rounds, when I was caught in a regular shower close by the bridge. In less than ten minutes half an inch of water had fallen on the roadway."

"Very good," said Gevrol. "Now, if the man had been here at half-past nine, his boots would have been covered with mud, unless he arrived earlier. You ought to have been able to ascertain this, as the floor is oaken, and has been recently beeswaxed. Were there any marks of footsteps when you first entered?"

"I'm sorry to say we never thought of looking."

"Ah!" grumbled the detective; "what a pity—what a pity!"

"Wait a moment," said the commissary. "It's not too late to see the marks—not in this room, but in the next. Nothing has been touched there. My footprints

and those of the brigadier can be easily distinguished. Come along."

And so saying, he was opening the door of the second room, when he was stopped by Gevrol.

"May I ask your permission, sir," said he, turning to the magistrate, "to be allowed to examine everything before any one else is allowed to enter? It is a matter of great importance to me."

"Certainly—certainly," acquiesced M. Daburon.

Gevrol passed in first, and all those behind him paused on the threshold. Thus he took in at one glance the scene before him.

CHAPTER III.

EVERYTHING appeared as the commissary had already stated, to have been scattered pell-mell as by the hands of a madman.

In the middle of the room stood a table covered with a fine damask cloth, white as the driven snow. At the farther end was a magnificent antique goblet of cut glass, an ivory-handled knife, and a plate. Next to these was placed a bottle of wine, hardly touched, and a bottle of brandy, from which about five or six *liqueur* glasses had been taken.

To the right, along the wall, stood two handsome oaken presses, one on each side of the window. Both were empty, and their contents strewn about the floor. These latter consisted of wearing apparel, linen, and other articles of clothing, all rumpled, unfolded, and thrown in a heap together.

At the other end of the room, near the chimney, a large cupboard, containing crockery, was wide open, and next to it an old secretary, with a marble slab, had been broken open, and then smashed in various places, evidently with the intention of discovering its innermost grooves. The shelf, half torn away, still hung by a single hinge, while the drawers had been taken out and thrown on the ground. The bed also, on the left hand side of the room, was completely unmade, blankets and sheets lying in a disordered heap beside it, even to the mattress, which had been half ripped open, and the horsehair strewn about like straw in a stable.

"Not even the faintest footprint," murmured Gevrol, with ill-concealed annoyance. "He must have arrived before half-past nine. We can enter without disturbing anything now."

And so saying, he walked right up to the corpse, and knelt beside it.

"Well, there's no denying but this affair has been neatly done," he grumbled. "The assassin, whoever he may be, was no novice. This is the work of a master, and not of an apprentice." Then, glancing from right to left, "Oh, oh!" he continued, "the poor old girl was busy with her cooking when the blow was struck that sent her into kingdom come in so unexpected a manner. Yes, there is the frying-pan on the floor; the rashers of ham and the eggs that were to have made the omelette. My gentleman was in a hurry, or he wouldn't have done the little business on an empty stomach. He hadn't even the patience to wait for his dinner. At any rate, he can't plead in his defense that his head was confused by the gayety of the dessert."

"It's very evident," said the commissary of police to the examining magistrate, "that robbery has been the motive of the crime."

"I should rather think so," said Gevrol, with a slight sneer. "And perhaps it was for the same reason that the forks and spoons have disappeared from the table."

"Hilloh! here's some gold in this drawer!" exclaimed Lecoq, who was rummaging about on his own account. "No less than three hundred and twenty francs."

"You don't mean that," said Gevrol, somewhat abashed; but recovering quickly from his astonishment, he continued, with his usual confidence, "I've heard of queerer things than that. I knew a man once who so completely lost his presence of mind after he had committed the murder, that he ran away without taking anything, and forgot his hat and gloves into the bargain. Our friend, on the present occasion, must have been nervous. Perhaps he was interrupted by some one knocking—who knows? I'm inclined to this opinion the more readily from the appearance of the candle. You see, he didn't leave it burning, but took the trouble to blow it out."

"Fudge!" said Lecoq. "That proves nothing. He may have been a man of economical tendencies."

The investigations of the two detectives were continued over the whole premises; but after the minutest researches they discovered nothing that gave them the slightest clue. Even the papers of the Widow Lerouge, had she ever possessed any, had disappeared. Not a letter, or an envelope, or a scrap of paper of any kind, could be found.

Every now and then the disappointed Gevrol paused to swear at the world at large, and himself in particular.

"Well, what do you make of it?" asked the judge, out of patience at the slow pace of the proceedings.

"We are sold," replied Gevrol, with a despairing shrug of the shoulders—"completely sold! For the present, that is. The scoundrel has taken no end of precautions; but we shall have him yet. Before the evening I will set my hounds on the scent; and he'll be run down to a dead certainty."

"Then, as it appears to me," observed Monsieur Daburon, "we are no farther advanced than we were this morning?"

"One does one's best, and the best of us can't do the impossible," replied Gevrol, sullenly.

"If Old Corkscrew, now, were only here," muttered Lecoq, in a low voice, which, however, reached the ears of Monsieur Daburon, "he'd draw the cork if any one could."

"What could the old fool do more than we have done?" asked Gevrol, darting an angry glance at his subordinate.

Lecoq turned away, secretly glad to have wounded the vanity of his too confident chief, but too wise to bring his anger upon himself.

"What's all that?" demanded Monsieur Daburon. "And who is this person—Old Corkscrew, as you call him—that he is likely to succeed where experienced men have failed? I somehow fancy I have heard of him before."

"He's a wonderful man," replied Lecoq, not sorry to be thus appealed to. "To use his own words, he can get at the heart of a mystery as easily as another would draw a cork from a bottle."

"He was formerly a poor clerk in a lawyer's office," added Gevrol. "The old fellow has come into money now. His real name is Tabaret. He has constituted himself a sort of detective for his own amusement."

"And to augment his revenues, I suppose?" sneered the commissary.

"Not he!" answered Lecoq. "It's a labor of love with him. He's never so happy as when he's ferreting after some difficult case, that 'ud make another chap's head ache for a week. We call him Old Corkscrew, just as well as we might call him Old Gimlet, because he can worm himself into anything. Why, it was he in that business of the robbery at the banker's, you know, sir, who asserted that it was the wife who was the thief, and proved it, too."

"That's all very well," retorted Gevrol; "but how about the poor little tailor whom he accused of having killed his wife, and nearly got him condemned? He's too clever by half, that he is."

"Come, come!" interrupted the magistrate, impatiently, "we are wasting time!" Then, turning to Lecoq, he said, "Fetch me this Monsieur Tabaret. I've heard a great deal of him, and should like to see him at his favorite employment."

Lecoq was gone in an instant, while Gevrol looked much mortified.

"Of course, sir," he commenced, "you have every right to employ any one that you may think proper; but"—

"Don't be offended, Gevrol," said the magistrate, good-humoredly. "It was not yesterday that I made your acquaintance—I know your value. Only to-day we differ completely in our opinions. You stick to the tall, dark, elderly man in the blouse, and I am convinced you're on the wrong scent."

"I still think I am right," answered the detective, "and I hope soon to prove it. I'll hunt up the rascal wherever he is."

"That's right. Let us all do our best."

"There's only one thing, however, which I hope you will permit me to observe, without thinking that I'm taking a liberty"—

"What's that?"

"Well, sir, since you are so kind, just allow me to warn you against Old Corkscrew—I beg your pardon, Monsieur Tabaret, I mean."

"Indeed! and for what reason?"

"Because the old boy is too hot-headed, too energetic, too eccentric; and as he is as vain as a peacock, he is very likely to lose his temper and betray everything. The moment he is made acquainted with a crime—like this of to-day, for instance—he has the impudence to explain everything off-hand. In short, sir, he'd think nothing of inventing a story to suit the situation. He pretends that from one fact he can build up the whole scenes of an assassination, like that learned chap—I forget his name—who from the fragment of a bone embedded in the earth was able to reconstruct upon paper the entire bird. Sometimes he guesses right, sometimes he guesses wrong. How about that poor little tailor? I assure you, sir, if I hadn't interfered"—

"That's enough," said Monsieur Daburon. "I'm much obliged to you for your advice; be sure I shall profit by it. In the meantime we must find out at all hazards where this widow lived before she came here, and to what part of France she belongs."

The procession of witnesses brought in by the brigadier of gendarmerie now commenced to file before the magistrate. But nothing new was discovered.

The Widow Lerouge, when alive, must certainly have been a most discreet woman, considering that, of all the words she had uttered—and as she was a great talker, the number must have been beyond human calculation—not one of any significance remained in the memory of any of her gossiping friends.

All the witnesses, however, were obstinately bent on making the magistrate a confidant of their convictions and their personal opinions, and these coincided with those expressed by Gevrol.

They unanimously, and as with one voice, accused the dark man in the blouse of having committed the crime.

Every one remembered his ferocious air, his sinister aspect; and their lively imaginations were not slow to add innumerable details to the somewhat fancy portrait they had sketched.

One evening, somebody declared that he had threatened a woman; while another asserted that he had cruelly beaten a child. It is true that neither the woman nor the child were forthcoming; but such small verifications were not at all necessary, and the public gave its ready belief to the wildest statement.

As an instance, while Monsieur Daburon was impatiently pacing the room, two fresh witnesses were thrust upon him.

One was a woman who kept a sort of chandler's shop in Bougival, at which the murdered woman had dealt; and the other a sharp-eyed little ragamuffin of a boy, both of whom, it was loudly asserted, knew "all about it."

The woman was the first who appeared.

She heard the Widow Lerouge speak of a son still living.

"Are you quite sure of that?" said the magistrate.

"As of my own existence, Mr. Judge," replied the chandler's shop-keeper. "More betoken that, on that very same evening—for it were an evening both wet and chilly, as I well remember—she, the poor defunct one, as is now no more, was, if I may venture to state such a thing, before a respectable gentleman, a little topsy-turvy."

"What?"

"I mean a little on the slack-rope, which is as much as to say, in vulgar language, that she'd been taking a drop too much. Poor creature! she was always a conversable woman, and not being on that occasion equal to walking, she stayed at my shop more than an hour."

"Well, well, what did she say?"

"I think I see her now," said the chandler's shop-keeper, brushing away an imaginary tear with the back of her hand—"I think I see her now, with both her elbows planted on the counter, close against the box that held the bacon and the candles, a chaffing one of the boatmen, as she called but a 'poor fresh-water make-believe, as was good for nothing but to pick up tickle-backs with a crooked pin and a stick.' 'My husband,' says she, 'was a regular sailor, salt as this 'ere bacon'—and she laid her hand on the fitch—who was away a year at a time on his voyages, which was a comfort to both of us, as he often said. She went on to say that she also had a son a sailor, like his father, but where he was at the time she was speaking she couldn't even guess."

"Did she mention the name of her son?"

"She said his name was Jacques."

"Did she speak against her husband?"

"Never; only that his manners were brutal, and he had a jealous disposition—a good man enough, but that he led her a miserable life. His great fault was that he had a weak head, and would fly out about nothing. In short, that he was a fool, and not too honest."

"Did her son ever visit her?"

"She was a close woman, and never spoke of that."

"Was she a good customer at your shop?"

"Well, that was according. About sixty francs a month—sometimes more; because when she took her liquor, she always took it of the best. Rest her soul! she was a worthy woman, and paid ready money."

Here the shopkeeper, diverging upon the advantages of ready money payments as a principle, and the disadvantages of trust as a practice, was abruptly dismissed by the magistrate, while the other witness—the boy—was shoved forward.

"Now, my boy," said the magistrate, "what do you know of this business?"

"Nothing, sir! Only, the day before yesterday, I saw a man standing in Madame Lerouge's gateway."

"With a dark complexion, dressed in a blouse, eh, my little man?"

"No, sir; quite the contrary. The man I saw was short, fat, and fair."

"You are sure you are not mistaken?"

"How could I be," said the boy, smartly, "when I spoke to him?"

"And he replied?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what you both said."

"Well, when I saw him first, he seemed rather cross about something—angry, I may say, which is more than being cross. His face was as red as a sliced beetroot, and so was his head—for his hat was off, and he was as bald as a billiard-ball."

"Did he speak to you first?"

"Yes; he called to me without waiting for an introduction. 'Hilloh, little 'un!' says he, 'you've a pair of good legs—do you want to earn half a franc?' 'Of course I do,' says I. 'Then,' says he, 'cut along down to the river, go on board the big black boat, painted black with a red streak, that lies close down by the landing-stage, and ask for Jervis, the master. Tell him to make all ready to start, that my business is over, and I'll be with him in the hauling of a rope.' Then, placing the half-franc in my hand, he stirred me up with a kick, and I bolted off to the river."

"If all the witnesses were as sharp as this little boy," said the commissary, "to examine them would be a pleasure! And now tell us how you performed the commission."

"I got aboard the boat, found the man, and gave the message, and—and that's all."

Gevrol, who had been listening with the most eager attention, stooped towards the ear of M. Daburon.

"If it is not asking too much, sir, will you be kind enough to let me put a few questions to the youngster?"

"Certainly," answered the magistrate.

"Look here, my little man," questioned the detective; "do you think if you saw the man you've been telling us about, that you'd recognize him again?"

"Oh, yes!"

"There was something queer about him, then?"

"Well, his red face."

"Was that all?"

"Yes, sir."

"But don't you remember how he was dressed? Had he a blouse?"

"No; he had on a round jacket with large pockets at the sides, and sticking out of one was a blue-striped pocket-handkerchief."

"What sort of trousers did he wear?"

"I don't remember."

"And his waistcoat?"

"Stop!" said the child, suddenly brightening up again. "Had he a waistcoat? I think not—perhaps he had, and perhaps he hadn't. I don't remember. But he had a neckerchief, I know, with the ends pulled through a ring."

"That's a wonderful boy!" remarked Gevrol, in a half-aside; "and if I were a single man, I'd adopt him."

The child, meanwhile, had knitted his soft brows tightly together, as with a violent effort of memory.

"I remarked something else," he said, after a short pause.

"What?"

"The man wore earrings—large earrings—very large!"

"Bravo!" cried Gevrol; "Nothing else is wanted. I feel I've got him already. Let me have a warrant for his arrest, and the thing is done."

These words were scarcely out of his mouth than Lecoq, eager and energetic as usual, burst into the room.

"Here's Old Corkscrew—I mean, Daddy Tabaret—that is to say, Monsieur Tabaret—speaking to strangers. I caught him just as he was leaving his house. What a man!—what a remarkable man he is! He wouldn't hear of waiting for the train, but took a cab—the first on the stand—never bargained for price, but drove down here like a madman. Here he comes—here he is! A wonderful man—a remarkable man! He'll draw the cork for us in less than five minutes!"

The detective became suddenly silent, as there appeared upon the threshold of the room a man, whose aspect, we are bound to confess, by no means warranted the eulogy so loudly expressed by his enthusiastic admirer.

CHAPTER IV.

THE new-comer was an elderly person, turned of sixty, and whose appearance loudly proclaimed that fact. Small, meagre, and slightly bent, he leant, with two long, nervous hands, crossed upon a bamboo cane, with a carved ivory top. His round, unmeaning visage was remarkable only for an expression of stupid astonishment. His cheeks and chin were closely shaven; and his nose, which was a frightful pug, seemed to be continually sniffing the air. His small eyes made up for their deficiency in size by their perpetual movement—they were never still for a moment; while his hair, which thatched but thinly a skull that set you in mind of that of a greyhound, in no wise interfered with a pair of long ears, which stood boldly out from his head, as if they had been the wings which adorned the cap of Mercury.

He was comfortably dressed in a suit of good broad-cloth, wore cotton gloves a little too large for him, and gaiters a little too small. A very massive gold chain, in the extreme of bad taste, went three times round his lean neck, and descended in a cascade to his waistcoat pocket.

Daddy Tabaret, otherwise Old Corkscrew, stopped abruptly on the threshold of the door, gave one sharp, quick glance at the magistrate, then lowered his eyelids, and said, in a voice of deferential politeness, "You have done me the honor of sending for me?"

"Yes," answered Monsieur Daburon, bowing in return to the other's salutation, which was of such a respectful nature that it nearly caused him to go on all-fours.

"If I can be of any use to you," continued the old man, "I shall be only too happy."

"You can be of very great service to us, Monsieur Tabaret," said the magistrate, "if you can succeed in finding out some clue that will enable us to track the assassin; for I must own to you that we all seem to be on the wrong scent. If you will take a chair, I will have the whole business explained to you as far as we have gone."

"Oh, I know enough of it already," interrupted Old Corkscrew. "Lecoq gave me the details as we came along."

"But still"—insinuated the magistrate.

"Leave it to me, sir.—leave it to me. I like to trust to my own first impressions, unbiassed by the observations of others, however valuable they may be; because, you see, sir, despite ourselves, we cannot help being influenced by them. But I fear I'm wasting time, so, if you will allow me, I will commence at once my researches with Lecoq."

And as the little old gentleman spoke, his small gray eyes brightened and gleamed till they shone like sparks of fire; his whole physiognomy reflected a sort of interior joy, and there was a laugh in every wrinkle. He seemed to grow taller—y younger, even; and it was with almost buoyant step he crossed the room, and entered with eager precipitancy the second chamber.

He stayed there some half an hour at least, then came rushing out as quickly as he had entered; rushed back again—returned, but only to vanish again and again as quickly.

The magistrate, M. Daburon, could not divest himself of the notion that in this strange old man's every motion and look there was a startling resemblance to a dog who searches ascent. The upturned nose and trembling nostrils appeared to seek in the air itself some subtle emanation of the assassin impalpable to others, while, in his quick comings and goings, his restless movings to and fro, he gesticulated and spoke aloud, apostrophising himself, heaping abuse upon his own stupidity, or, by little exclamations of approbation and triumph, appearing to encourage himself to a more energetic search. His activity was incessant, and his friend and admirer, Lecoq, was not left for one moment in peace. Daddy Tabaret required this, Daddy Tabaret required that. Now it was paper and a pencil, then it was a spade; next he shouted for some wet clay, some plaster, water, and, last of all, a bottle of oil.

More than an hour having passed in this manner, the magistrate began to grow impatient, and demanded of the brigadier what had become of their amateur detective.

"He's in the road," replied the brigadier with a grin.

"When I last saw him, he was lying down in the mud on his stomach, and mixed up some plaster in a plate. He told me to say he had nearly finished, and would be at your disposition in a moment."

The words were scarcely out of the gendarme's mouth, when Daddy Tabaret appeared, joyous, radiant, triumphant; looking positively younger by twenty years.

At his heels, close as his shadow, followed Lecoq, carrying with the greatest precaution a large basket.

"I've got it!" cried the old gentleman, as he advanced briskly towards Monsieur Daburon. "I've drawn the cork, though it's the very tightest I've ever wormed the screw into. Lecoq, my good young man, put that basket down upon the table; but gently—gently! One rough shake, and I shall have all my work to do over again."

At this interesting moment, Gevrol also re-entered the room. He had returned from his expedition almost as triumphant as Old Corkscrew himself.

"I've marked down the chap with the ear-rings," he said. "It's a beautiful trail to follow. The boat went down the river, and I've got an exact description of its master."

"Now, Monsieur Tabaret, I am anxious to have your report," said the magistrate.

All eyes were now turned on Old Corkscrew, and every word that might fall from his oracular mouth. He had already emptied out upon the table the contents of the basket—viz., a large clod of clay, several large sheets of paper, and three or four pieces of plaster still wet.

Standing upright before the table, the queer old gentleman looked doubly grotesque, and the eccentricity of his appearance was not lessened from the fact that he was covered with mud from his toes to his chin. With the air of a lecturer, and amidst the deepest silence, he commenced, in a tone whose studied modesty could not altogether hide the pride that possessed him:

"My first discovery is this: that robbery has nothing to do with the crime in question, and that we shall find there exist private and far more terrible motives that have led to the murder of the unfortunate Widow Lerouge."

CHAPTER V.

"YES," continued Daddy Tabaret, in a tone of conviction that evidently impressed his hearers, "this has been no common murder. The assassin, in perpetrating his awful purpose, has been impelled by some secret and fearful determination, that has made all other thoughts subservient to it. I will prove this to you by the evidence, and afterwards, if you will allow me, I will give you my humble opinion as to the probable motive of the crime."

Gevrol glanced at the magistrate, to see the effect Old Corkscrew was having upon him; but, observing the fixed and attentive expression of his face, he checked the sneer that he was preparing, and consoled himself by yawning.

"It is obvious, then," proceeded Monsieur Tabaret, "that the assassin arrived here before half-past nine—that is to say, before the rain commenced. Like Monsieur Gevrol, I have not succeeded in detecting any muddy footprints; but under the table, just where the feet of the visitor must have been placed, I found a considerable quantity of dust. Consequently, we are pretty fairly fixed about the time. The Widow Lerouge never expected the new-comer; she had, in fact, commenced to undress, and was just winding up her clock when the knock came to the door."

"Rather minute details," murmured the commissary of police, with just the shadow of a smile round the corners of his mouth.

"They can be easily authenticated," said the self-constituted detective. "Examine this cuckoo-clock above the old high writing-desk. It is one of those that go from fourteen to fifteen hours at a time; but, whether it does or not, one thing is positive—that the widow was winding it up before going to bed. How, then, is it that this clock should have stopped at five o'clock? Because she had just commenced to draw the weights up when the knock came; and to support the assertion, let me draw your attention to this chair under the clock, and to the footprint upon its cover. Now look at the costume of the victim. The body of her dress has been taken off, and, in her hurry to open the door, she had thrown this old shawl round her shoulders."

"Well, I never!" exclaimed the brigadier, evidently much struck.

"The widow," continued Old Corkscrew, "recognized the knock. Her hurry in opening the door made me at first suspect this. What follows proves it. Thus the murderer was admitted without the slightest demur, and must have been already known to his victim. He is a man still young, a little above the middle height, and elegantly dressed. He wore, on the evening in question, a hat, and not a cap. He had an umbrella, and was smoking a Trabucos cigar with a mouth-piece."

"Oh, come, draw it mild!" cried Gevrol, unable to restrain his feelings any longer. "I can swallow a great deal, but this is too much."

"Too much, or too little," retorted Old Corkscrew, "it's the truth. If you are not as minute and careful as I am, that's your fault, not mine. I seek, and I find. Too much, is it? Well, just come here, and, if you will be so condescending, glance at these pieces of wet plaster. They represent the boot heels of the assassin, of which I found two magnificent impressions near the ditch where the key was found. Upon these sheets of paper I have traced the entire footprint, which, being upon sand, I could not succeed in otherwise bringing away. Look! High heel, arched instep, foot little and narrow—an elegant boot, you must own. You will find this footstep twice repeated on the road, and five times in the garden—which proves, by the way, that the wearer of the boot had knocked, not at the door, but at the shutter of the window, through the chink of which he must have seen a light. At the entrance of the garden

our man made a jump to avoid stepping upon a flower-bed, as the point of the boot, sunk deep in the soil, sufficiently betrays. Thus he cleared, with apparently little exertion, a distance of nearly two yards. This shows him to have been light and supple—therefore, a young man."

Old Corkscrew spoke in high, shrill tones, metallic and cutting as a razor, and his restless eyes wandered incessantly from one to the other of his auditors, watching their impressions.

"Is it my remark about the hat that has astonished you, Monsieur Gevrol?" pursued Tabaret. "Examine the perfect circle left upon the dusty marble slab of the old writing-desk. Is it because I have fixed on the height of the individual in question? Be so good as to look at the top of those oak presses, and you will perceive that hands have been passed over them, as if in search of something. Don't tell me that he stood on a chair, for in that case he could have seen without being obliged to feel. Are you sceptical about the umbrella? This clod of earth contains an admirable imprint not only of the top, but of the round piece of wood that holds the silk. Is it the cigar that annoys you? Here is the end of the Trabucos, which I picked out of the cinders. Has the extremity been bitten, or is it wet with saliva? No. Therefore the person who smoked it must have used a mouthpiece."

Lecoq endeavored, but with very small success, to conceal his enthusiastic admiration of his old friend; and, in order to repress any outward signs of approval, rubbed his hands softly together, as though he were going through the process of washing them.

The commissary of police seemed stupefied; the magistrate looked delighted; while Gevrol's face, on the contrary, grew longer and longer. As for the brigadier of *gendarmérie*, he appeared to be in the seventh heaven of enjoyment.

"Now," continued the old gentleman, "pray give me your most earnest attention. We have come to the point where the young man has entered the cottage. How he accounted for his presence at so late an hour, of course, I cannot tell; but one thing is very certain, he told the Widow Lerouge he hadn't dined. The worthy woman immediately set about preparing a repast—a repast in which she herself did not join, because in the cupboard there are still the remains of her dinner, and you will perceive plates are not laid for two."

Here Old Corkscrew paused, elevated his inquisitive nose in the air, and, with twinkling eyes, surveyed the assembled company. Never was a man more delighted with his audience. All were deeply interested in the marvellous exposition of cause and effect. Attention was upon every countenance; and even those who had been prepared to scoff, not only gave up such absurd expectation, but were, if possible, more eagerly curious than the rest.

The cunning old ferret had produced his effect. His pause was the pause of the popular speaker or the favorite actor, who, having "struck fire," by some glowing phrase or well-turned bit of "sensational" waits till the excitement has just a little cooled before he electrifies them with his next.

A murmur of impatience from every side, and Daddy Tabaret, after sniffing thrice in a manner very irritating to the nerves, went on.

"We now approach the great question of questions—Who was this young man? It is evident that the widow considered his position in society to be much above her own. In the cupboard there is a table-cloth, hardly soiled at all; but instead of making use of it, she brings out a clean one, and decidedly one of her best. This splendid goblet of cut glass was of course intended for him, and displayed in honor of his coming. And, lastly, I think, it is probable she seldom made use of this handsome ivory-handled knife."

"All this is very exact," murmured the magistrate—"very exact."

"Behold, then, our young man seated at table. He began by drinking a glass of wine, while the widow prepared the ham and eggs, and placed the frying-pan on the fire. Then, his heart failing him, he asked for brandy, and drank right off about four or five *liqueur* glasses. After an inward struggle of, let us say, about ten minutes—it must have taken about that time to have cooked the ham and eggs to the degree that we now see them—the young man rose, approached the widow, who must have been on her knees or bent over the fire, and stabbed her twice in the back. Death was not instantaneous. She half rose, and clung to the hands of the assassin, while he, starting backwards, must have dragged her suddenly forwards, and then thrown her on her face in the position that we find her at present. This brief struggle is indicated by the posture of the corpse. Bent forwards and struck in the back, it is upon the back she should have fallen. The instrument the murderer used for his purpose was a sharp and pointed one. This instrument, if I am not greatly in error, was a foil with the button taken off, and afterwards sharpened. He has left us an indication of this in wiping the weapon upon the petticoat of his victim. Another fact is that he has been neither scratched or in any way injured in the struggle. The widow, as I have said before, clung to his hands, but as he had not taken off his pearl-gray kid gloves"—

"Oh, come! you're not writing a novel, Daddy Tabaret!" expostulated Gevrol.

"Have you examined the finger-nails of the widow, my dear sir?"

"No."

"Well, oblige me by doing so, and I'm sure you'll agree with me as to the latter detail."

Having thus "settled" the scepticism of the head of the detective force, Monsieur Tabaret continued his discourse.

"The poor woman being now disposed of, the next question is, what was the motive of the murderer? Perhaps you have surmised it to have been her money,

or dated bills, or some sordid meanness of that sort? No, gentlemen! a hundred times no!"

Here Old Corkscrew, in his energy, pounded the table and shook his fist at the company in general, but as nobody ventured to hazard a remark, he cleared his throat and went on.

"What the young gentleman wanted, what he sought for, what he determined to have, were papers—family papers—which he knew to be in the possession of the widow. To become master of these he inspects everything—empties the oaken presses, unfolds the linen, smashes the old writing-desk, of which he cannot get the key, and rips open the mattress. At last success crowns his efforts—he finds what he seeks. And do you know what he does with these papers? He burns them. Not in the fireplace, but in the little stove in the front room. The end he had in view being now accomplished, what is his next move? To fly from the scene of his crime, and in taking with him every object of value endeavor to put justice off the scent by indicating robbery as the motive of the murder. Having made a collection of every portable article he can put his hand on, he makes a bundle of them in the table-napkin intended for his use at dinner, blows out the candle, shuts and locks the door behind him, throws the key into the ditch by the roadside, and then—and then, gentlemen—that's all!"

So saying, Monsieur Tabaret, with a shrug, abruptly subsided into a chair, and wiped his forehead with an old red silk pocket-handkerchief.

"Upon my word, Monsieur Tabaret," said the magistrate, "I must compliment you upon your inquiry into this business. In fact, from its being so clear, so precise, and so probable, I am inclined to think that you are on the trail."

"Hurrah! Didn't I say so?" cried Lecoq, springing from his chair, and, forgetful for a moment of the presence of Monsieur Daburon, slapping his thigh in his enthusiasm. "Didn't I say he'd draw the cork, if any one could?"

"Yes," said Gevrol, with ill concealed irony; "Daddy Tabaret has certainly an inventive ability, that, if cultivated, would make the fortune of a novelist. But I'm a little doubtful about that parcel of goods he spoke of just now. Fancy a young swell walking about with a bundle enveloped in a table-napkin, as if he were taking his own linen to the wash!"

"I can't fancy it at all," returned old Corkscrew, quietly. "You will agree with me, I suppose, that he wouldn't have been so idiotic as to have taken the omnibus at Marly?"

"Of course not," acquiesced Gevrol.

"Now, my impression is that he went on foot by the short cut to the banks of the Seine, and there—unless he has overmatched me in cunning, and baffled me altogether—that he got rid of his suspicious-looking and troublesome bundle by throwing it into the river."

"Do you think so, Daddy Tabaret?" asked Gevrol, reflectively.

"Think so! I'll bet you anything you like upon it; and the proof is, I have sent three men, under the directions of a gendarme, to drag the river at the spot I have indicated. If they find the bundle, they shall be handsomely rewarded, I can tell you."

"You don't mean to say you're going to stand the damage on your own account?"

"Yes, Monsieur Gevrol; I shall pay the reward from my own purse, and for my own satisfaction," said the old enthusiast, grandly.

"It would indeed be a lucky chance if they found the bundle," commenced the magistrate; but before he finished what he was about to say, a gendarme entered the room, and placed the very bundle in question upon the table.

It was dripping with water, and contained plate, money, and some jewelry.

"One hundred francs was the reward promised," said the gendarme, as, with a military salute, he dropped the clinking trophy on the table.

Daddy Tabaret, with an air of intense satisfaction, drew from his pocket a bulky and somewhat greasy pocket-book, from which he extracted a bank-note, and handed it to the gendarme; then after annihilating Gevrol with a look of triumph impossible to describe, he turned to Monsieur Daburon.

"Now sir, will you permit me to ask your opinion?"

"Well, really," said the gentleman addressed, with difficulty repressing a smile at the grand air of the little old man, "your powers of penetration are so extraordinary that"—

But here again, before he could complete his sentence, the doctor who had been summoned to make the *post mortem* examination presented himself.

He simply confirmed the assertions and the conjectures of Monsieur Tabaret. He agreed with him in his opinion that there had been a struggle previous to the fact, which accounted for the position in which the body had been found; and as a confirmation of this, he pointed out a bluish circle faintly visible round the throat of the victim, as though produced by compression; and lastly, he stated that the Widow Lerouge had partaken of food about three hours before her death.

There now remained only a few odds and ends of evidence to be collected, which might be of use at a later period in convicting the murderer.

Old Corkscrew, with the most extreme care, again examined the finger-nails of the dead woman, and with the most infinite patience succeeded in extracting from beneath them the few atoms of the kid glove he had spoken of. Infinitesimally small as these atoms were, yet the color of the glove was still easily to be distinguished. He also put aside the pieces of petticoat upon which the assassin had wiped his dagger. These, with the bundle which had been found in the Seine, and the divers foot-prints extracted by the old man, were the only traces left by the murderer.

Slight material enough; but slight as it may appear

to us, in the eyes of Monsieur Daburon it was of very great importance, and his spirit rose with his hopes.

The rock that the police in general split upon in crimes of a complex and mysterious nature is an error as to the motive of the act. Once they start on a false scent, they go further and further from the truth, in proportion to the ardor with which they pursue their investigations; but in the present case, thanks to Daddy Tabaret, the magistrate was nearly certain that he was on the wrong track.

CHAPTER VI.

NIGHT had come.

For the time being, the magistrates had nothing more to do at La Jonchere, Gevrol, who was burning with impatience to be after the dark man with the ear-rings, declared his intention of taking up his quarters at Bougival, and to spend the rest of his evening in ferreting about the wine-shops, and hunt up, if possible, new witnesses.

At the moment of starting, when the commissary of police and the rest had taken leave of him, Monsieur Daburon proposed that Daddy Tabaret and he should return to Paris together.

"I was just about to solicit that honor," said the old man, bowing; and, as they walked side by side, the newly-discovered crime became the subject of their conversation.

"Shall we ever succeed in discovering the antecedents of this woman?" repeated Old Corkscrew, for about the sixth time. "The whole thing lies in that."

"We shall succeed in discovering them," said the magistrate, "if the woman who keeps the tallow-chandler's shop has spoken the truth. If the husband of the Widow Lerouge has been a seaman—if her son Jacques is in the same profession—I can easily get the necessary information from the naval authorities. In point of fact I'll make a point of writing to them this very evening."

But Daddy Tabaret had become suddenly silent. He was reflecting, seeking, combining, and his face, expressive of the intensity of his pre-occupation, amused the magistrate; who, sitting opposite, looked curiously at this singular old man, whose eccentric tastes led him to place himself at the service of the detective police.

"Monsieur Tabaret," said he, at last, abruptly breaking the long silence, "how long is it since you've been a detective?"

"Nine years, sir—nine years and more," replied Old Corkscrew, starting from his reverie.

"Indeed! So long as that?"

"Yes, sir; and if you won't think me too presuming, I am surprised you haven't heard of me before."

"I knew you long ago by reputation," answered Monsieur Daburon; "and it was the excellent reports I had received of your talents in this sort of investigation that induced me to call you to my assistance. What I am curious to know is what were the circumstances which first tempted you to adopt this career?"

"Sorrow!" said the old man, simply. "Sorrow, loneliness, and weariness of mind and body. Ah, sir! I have not been always happy—far from it."

"Yet I am told you are rich."

The old man heaved a profound sigh, as he answered: "I am in what is called easy circumstances—well to do, as they say, in worldly matters; but it has been otherwise with me—far otherwise—in times past."

The bitter recollections of the mournful past seemed for a moment to overwhelm the speaker. He passed his thin hand several times over his forehead, as if by the action he could sweep it away from his memory, as a housemaid might sweep the dust and cobwebs from a wall.

"I dragged on, rather than lived, a life until I was forty-five years of age," he continued; "a life of sacrifice—a life of absurd and useless privation. I had a father who blighted my youth, spoiled my manhood, and made me one of the most unfortunate of men."

There are some professions which are of such a peculiar character that they wrap those who belong to them over like a cloak—a cloak that they never succeed in laying aside. Monsieur Daburon, for instance, was always, and everywhere, a little too much of the lawyer, and so he commenced unconsciously to interrogate Daddy Tabaret.

"And how was it," Monsieur Tabaret, he asked, "that your father was the author of all your misfortunes?"

"I will tell you presently, sir. I can forgive him now. Time is anger's best medicine, and heals even the sorrows of the heart. I was earning a hundred a year as chief clerk in a lawyer's office, when my father came to me one morning, and informed me in the most sudden manner possible that he was ruined—that some mercantile speculation in which he had been engaged had suddenly failed, and that he had not a farthing in the world. He appeared to be in the utmost despair, and darkly hinted at suicide. Now, sir, I loved my father. It made my heart ache to see his dejection and his misery. I looked at the poor old boy with eyes half blinded with tears, and then calling my inventive ability to my aid, gave him a glowing account of my future prospects in life. I told him that perhaps the lawyer might take me into partnership—queerer things had happened than that. I said that as long as I had a crust of bread in the cupboard he should share it, and finished off by asking him to come and live with me—a proposition which he accepted with alacrity; and for twenty years, sir—twenty long years I was burdened with this—this—"

The old man stopped, as if choked with emotion.

"Come, come, Monsieur Tabaret; don't repent of having done a noble action."

"But I do!—I do!" vociferated Old Corkscrew. "I have repented it all my life. Better far would it have

been for me had both of us died—poisoned by the crust we shared in our penury and misery!"

Monsieur Daburon made a gesture of pained surprise, which did not escape his companion.

"Hear me out before you condemn me," he continued. "Behold me then, at the early age of five-and-twenty, enduring the utmost privation to surround my father with a few comforts. In order to augment our revenues, I gave up smoking, and spent my evenings in copying barrister's briefs and theatrical manuscripts. But do what I could, the old man was always complaining, always regretting his past comforts. 'Not a farthing in my pocket,' he would say; 'not a farthing to buy a pinch of snuff!' No effort that I made contented him. And yet the efforts were many. Heaven only knows what I suffered! I wasn't born," continued the old gentleman, after a pause that was in itself pathetic, a strong will alone controlling a strong emotion—"I wasn't born to live the life of a dog in a kennel—a morose and solitary existence, caring only for my meals, and a passing pat of the hand. On the contrary, my dream, my ambition had ever been to find a heart responsive to mine; to find a wife, in fact, whose presence would make a Paradise of my home, however humble, and see children grow up like flowers to brighten our existence, and make everything joyous by their babble, just like the spring and summer song of birds. This was my dream—a dream I soon found it would be impossible for me to realize; my sense of duty was too strong for me even to make an attempt to do so. The thought of my father, old, ailing and destitute, was never absent from my brain; and often, when the fires of youth struggled and glowed in my bosom as in a volcano, I quenched them by a flood of remorseful tears, and said to myself, with all the severity of an impartial judge, saving your presence, Monsieur Daburon, 'Look here, my lad, when one even by the hardest labor gains at the most but a paltry hundred a year, and has to support out of that a father well stricken in years, with no one but yourself to keep him from the workhouse, you must put an extinguisher upon all the domestic aspirations, and make up your mind, poor devil, to remain a bachelor all your life.'"

"A brave, if not a wise resolve, Monsieur Tabaret," said the magistrate. "Of course, you argued upon a theory, an idea—you had never really loved?"

The old man started, and his eyes filled with tears, as he replied: "You may the better appreciate the sacrifice I made when I tell you that there was one I loved with all my heart. Ah! thirty years have rolled by since then? The world has changed, and I have changed. Look at me," said the old fellow, with a laugh which he meant to be jocular, but which was full of bitterness; "I am not a particularly handsome man—far from it; but she loved me, poor thing! Her name was Hortense." He paused again for a moment; then, after a gulp, spoke very hurriedly. "Who knows what has become of her, what her fate has been? She was doubly cursed, being handsome and poor. I had only enough to keep one. I chose my father, and—and—well, I've forgiven him long ago. He was a cruel, bad man, but"—here Daddy Tabaret shook his head sadly—"he was my father."

"What do you mean?" demanded Monsieur Daburon, somewhat shocked.

"Mean! Simply that on the day after my father's death I found by documents, papers, investments, all carefully concealed from me, he had died the possessor of what, to a man like me, was enormous wealth. With his last breath he had complained of his poverty, and had died the possessor of twenty thousand pounds."

"What? He was rich!"

"Rich!" echoed Tabaret, with a laugh that was full of a mocking bitterness. "Besides the sum I have mentioned, he was proprietor of a property near Orleans, which brought him in six thousand francs a year. He had, besides this, the house in Paris I now inhabit. We then jointly occupied a small apartment in it, and I—fool, ape, idiot, dolt that I was—paid the rent every quarter, out of my scanty earnings, to the porter of the house, which rent went into my father's pocket."

"Well, I must say it was too bad," said Monsieur Daburon, an instinctive delicacy of feeling preventing him from expressing his real indignation at the author of the blighted existence of the poor soul before him.

"Bad!" said the other, pathetically: "it was worse than bad—it was positive robbery. And to make matters worse, and to die, as it were, with a sarcasm on his lips, he left a will, declaring, in the name of all that is held sacred, that his one aim and view in life had been my happiness and prosperity. He desired—so ran the words in the will—to teach his beloved and only son the grand principles of order and economy, and by so doing, save him from the folly and absurdity common to youths of his age. Youth! He must have been laughing at me. I was then forty-five years of age, dispirited and weary with the hard fight I had been fighting for twenty years against poverty, hunger and cold. He had been speculating upon the strong affection I had for him, upon my soft heart and utter self-denial; that's what he had been doing, Monsieur Daburon—that's what he had been doing."

There was something so grotesque in the grief of Old Corkscrew, that it was with difficulty that the magistrate prevented himself from laughing, in spite of the really painful nature of the story he had just heard.

"At least," he said, at last, "this fortune must have been a great gratification to you."

"Not in the least, sir—not in the least. It came too late. What's the use of a good dinner when you have no teeth to eat it with? I had not the heart to marry. What woman would accept such an old scarecrow as me? The first step I took on coming into my fortune was to resign my situation in favor of a poor clerk under me, who had been promised promotion on my retirement or death. But I had been accustomed to a

life of business routine. At the end of a month I was sick of doing nothing, and to fill up the aching void of my existence, resolved to cultivate an eccentricity, a passion, a mania of some sort, so I set about collecting books. Perhaps you imagine, sir, that a man, to have a taste of this sort, must be a scholar?"

"I know that he must have money," said the magistrate, smiling.

"Well, I am not poor, and have some knowledge of the mysteries comprehended in the words reading and writing. But the books I so ardently collected were those which more exclusively treated of the secret business connected with the police, which detailed the subtle skill that mesh by mesh unraveled each criminal web, however carefully spun. I felt more and more fascinated by that mysterious power which sleeplessly watches over our public and private safety, whose agents penetrate everywhere, whose myriad unseen hands lift up the thickest veils, and draw aside the darkest curtains. I studied each case as a clever and striving barrister studies his brief, till, in time, a devouring ambition took possession of me, a craving desire that I might myself become an agent, however humble, in the great work—a portion of the vast machine which intellect directs in its movements and the hand of justice puts in motion. Yes, even I, by a careful development of the faculties I felt within me, might become a sort of providence on a small scale, in aid of the punishment of crime and the triumph of innocence."

"A creditable resolve, Monsieur Tabaret," said the magistrate.

"And I owe to it," returned the old gentleman, "some of the purest enjoyments of my life. Ah, Monsieur Daburon, let no one speak to me of the pleasures of hunting down the stag or the fox, of the delights of striking down the swift-winged bird in its flight; but talk to me if you will of the *hunters of men*! That is a chase which alone brings every faculty into active play; a chase in which the hunted down is on a par with the hunter, having with him intelligence, strength and cunning; it is a fight in which the arms used are nearly equal—at least, they are the same in character. With a moment's pause, to take breath, the old man, now quite carried away by his subject, went on. "But unfortunately, grand crimes—I mean crimes remarkable for their depth of subtlety and boldness of conception—are becoming more and more rare. The race of illustrious scoundrels, as clever as they were fearless, is nearly extinct, and we shall soon have nothing left to us but a set of sneaking, petty larceny rogues, as cowardly as they are common-place. It can't be denied, of course, that every now and then we come across a few clever scoundrels; but their 'little game' is so very apparent, they present us, as it were, with their photographic cards, and one feels no pride in bowling them out. The case once proved, all we've got to do is to go quietly and arrest them."

"It appears to me, however," interrupted Monsieur Daburon, with a smile, "that our friend the murderer in the present instance, hasn't been such a contemptible fellow as those you have been just describing."

"Ah!" said the old enthusiast, "he's an exception. It would be a feather in any man's cap to find him out. I will spare neither trouble nor expense. Indeed, I wouldn't mind even going so far as to personally compromise myself in the business; for," he continued, with a sort of embarrassment in his manner, "I must confess that I do not boast of my exploits in my own private circle of friends; in fact, I hide them with a scrupulous care, for it is more than probable that there would be far less friendship in the grasp of their hands if they knew that the quiet, pottering and utterly respectable citizen, Daddy Tabaret, with just intelligence enough to keep his nose from the door-post, was no other than the famous unraveler of criminal mysteries—the redoubtable Old Corkscrew himself."

In pronouncing the last name the speaker drew himself up with an air of conscious dignity, that it was with difficulty that the magistrate could hide a smile.

"You are not the only one, by many, Monsieur Tabaret, who has turned out to the world an impenetrable mask, and deceived its curious eyes by a false exterior."

The magistrate said this with something like a sigh; then, by a slight repressive gesture, gave a polite hint that their conversation, for the present, was over.

It was arranged that old Corkscrew should, on the morrow, take up his abode at Bougival, and make secret and searching inquiries everywhere in the neighborhood; while Monsieur Daburon was to keep the old gentleman well posted with such intelligence as his agents might glean concerning the past life and conduct of the unfortunate Widow Lerouge.

"In conclusion, Monsieur Tabaret," said the magistrate, throwing off for the moment all official reserve, "I am at all times visible to you. Should you have occasion to speak to me, do not hesitate about the place or the hour; night or day, it is the same to me. I go abroad but rarely, and you will find me always either at my own house in the Rue de Seine, or in my own private office at the court, and I will give orders for your immediate admission at whatever time you may present yourself."

They were leaving the railway-station as Monsieur Daburon made this promise, which, together with the general kindness of his manner, gave great delight to Daddy Tabaret; but the latter refused the magistrate's offer of a seat in the cab he had called, on the plea that his own home, in the Rue St. Lazare, was but a few paces from where they stood.

"To-morrow, then," said the magistrate, extending his hand—"to-morrow you start on the trail of the murderer."

"And I shall run him down," replied Old Corkscrew, with all that self-confidence in his subtle instincts which marks the savaged weller in the wilderness rather than the civilized inhabitant of a great city. "The

scent is weak, and the trail is indistinct as yet, but the one will strengthen and the other will broaden in time. And when he least expects it, when his confidence is at its highest, when his laugh of triumph is at its loudest, I shall have run this fox to earth!"

The magistrate smiled at the other's enthusiasm, and slightly raised his eyebrows as he said: "The murderer, whoever he may be, will surround himself with a myriad precautions to prevent even the possibility of suspicion reaching him. You must remember, as proved by your own admirable analysis, that this is no common crime, Monsieur Tabaret."

The old man laid a finger respectfully on the arm of the magistrate, and there was a bright gleam in his piercing eyes as he said, in low, firm tones, that had in them nothing of vulgar vanity: "This is no common crime, as you say, and it is exactly that which gives me almost a certainty of its detection. I do not say tomorrow or next day—no, not for days, weeks, months to come; but the scent of blood is the strongest scent of all—it never dies out, and the crimson mark that will lead us on is to him, the man we seek, a red mist, through which he gropes and stumbles towards an open grave?"

Then raising his hat, and with a muttered apology for the liberty he had taken in touching so familiarly the arm of the magistrate, the strange old man turned on his heel and hurried away.

CHAPTER VII.

THE house of Daddy Tabaret, as he had said, was only four or five minutes' walk from the station in the Rue St. Lazare.

It is a capital piece of house property, and from its central position ought to produce him a splendid income—that is, if he is prudent enough to ask a reasonable rent in the letting of its various stories. As for himself he occupies the first floor, which consists of five handsome and spacious rooms, comfortably furnished, with his magnificent collection of books as their chief adornment.

He lives here in a simple way—simple and frugal from a natural taste as much as from habit—attended by one servant, an old woman, to whom the porter upon grand occasions lends a helping hand, refreshed in a pecuniary way by his landlord and master, Monsieur Tabaret.

Nobody in the house has the faintest suspicion of the peculiar occupation and tastes of their landlord. They suppose him to be a quiet, inoffensive sort of man, whose solitary life is commencing to have a softening effect upon his brain. They remark, with pity, his singular habits, his frequent and almost mysterious absences from his home, and his eccentric, pre-occupied manner on his return. As they observe among themselves, never was there a young man about town in all the bloom of health and spirits later in his hours and more irregular in his ways than this queer old man. He could not be counted upon at meal-time, did not care if his dinner was cold or hot, ate it at all times and at all hours, and sometimes went out in the middle of the night with bread and cheese in his pocket, and never came back for a week.

Sometimes also he received strange visitors. Men were seen knocking at his door of a most queer appearance; women also who excited suspicion in the minds of several of his virtuous female lodgers, and who calumniated poor Daddy Tabaret in consequence; but the old man, when expostulated with, only shrugged his shoulders, and laughed silently to himself, refusing all invitations to dinner even from the most sincere and Christian of his lady friends, who were anxious to make a convert of a reprobate, who had the double attraction of being both old and rich.

There was one of his lodgers, however, that the landlord delighted to honor, and who formed an exception in every way to the rule he had laid down.

This was a widow lady named Madam Gerdy, who lived on the third story with her only son, Noel.

Daddy Tabaret, in fact, was more "at home" in the widow's apartments than in his own.

Her son, Noel, was a young man of about thirty-three years of age, looking rather older than he really was. He was tall, well made, and had a noble and intelligent expression of face. To add to his natural advantages, he had also large, dark eyes, and black hair, which curled naturally. By profession a barrister, he had acquired a certain reputation. He was what is called a "hard worker," rather obstinate in his opinions, very cold in his manners, and thoughtful in all he undertook. He professed also—perhaps with a little too much ostentation—a great severity in his religious principles, and was extremely rigid and austere in his morals.

In Madame Gerdy's apartments Daddy Tabaret considered himself as one of the family. He looked upon her as a kinswoman, and treated Noel as his son. He had often meditated offering marriage to the charming widow, notwithstanding that she was much younger than himself, but, had desisted, not so much from the fear of a refusal, but from the fear of the consequences of his proposal.

Supposing she refused him, then good-bye forever to the quiet, happy evenings and the delicious halo of home she had thrown about his desolate heart.

In the meantime he had made a will, drawn up in full form, making his young friend, the barrister, his residuary legatee, with the sole condition that two hundred pounds a-year were to be put aside in favor of any defective "who drew the cork" out of a difficult and baffling police case.

Short as was the distance from the railway-station to his house, Daddy Tabaret took more than a quarter of an hour to arrive there. No sooner had he quitted the magistrate than he resumed his self-communing and reflections, and so deeply was he wrapped up in them that he walked on without heeding the passers by, and

was so pushed and elbowed, that for every step he took in advance he lost the space of half of it.

It is unnecessary to say that the subject of his thought was still the mysterious murder of the Widow Lerouge.

For the fiftieth time, the old man repeated to himself her words, as reported by the milkwoman:

"I have nothing in the funds; but I have all I want. If I wished for more I could have it."

"At the bottom of the boat," he muttered, "lies a clue to the whole business. The woman Lerouge was in possession of some secret which it was the interest of some person or persons, rich and highly placed, to keep hidden. In that secret lay her fortune. It was her bank, from which she drew at pleasure. She has abused the power she possessed, and they driven to desperation, have wiped her out; that's about the whole truth of it. But now comes the question—what was that secret, and by what means did she become its possessor? It's possible that, in her youth, she might have held a situation in some great family, and while in the service of that family she may have seen, overheard, or ferreted out something of importance, or something hurtful to its credit, dangerous to its honor. Had it been merely a rich man, a piece of common clay, whose only strength was his wealth, he would have hired some other hand to deal the blow that was to silence her menaces forever; but here there was no second party concerned. The hand that did the deed belonged to the brain that had conceived it, thus preventing the constant danger of betrayal that must ever exist when, in some delicate matter, one works with an accomplice. A bold spirit whoever it is, and one who, his crime accomplished, will calculate every chance of discovery as calmly as a mathematician considers his figures, trusting to his clearness of brain, to his depth of knowledge, to produce a desired result. He, the murderer, whoever he is, is playing a bold game, evidently for a large stake; but he has not yet taken Daddy Tabaret into his scheme, and the old man will sweep the chess-board yet."

So saying, he entered the gateway of his house, and passed, without a word, the porter and his wife, who sat in their little lodge—he, the man, cobbling shoes; she, the woman, cooking a greasy omelette over a smoky stove.

"There goes our landlord," remarked the man, as Daddy Tabaret, with a quick glance inside the lodge, and a half-nod, glided quickly by.

"He must have quarreled with his ladylove this evening," said the porter's wife, with a prolonged sniff, which enabled her to express the extent of her disdain, and at the same time refresh her snuff-grimed nose with the fumes of the omelette; "and she's sent him home two hours earlier, with a flea in his ear. The old boy seems to have something more upon his mind than ordinary."

"It isn't decent, the way he sometimes stops out of a night," grumbled the cobbler, as he paused in hammering out the sole of a boot to glance out of his window into the courtyard of the house. "He's one of those soft old chaps whom every one can take advantage of. Any one might lead him by the nose. Look at him now? 'Pon my word, it would be a charity if his friends would club together, and buy him a straight-waistcoat."

"Relations!" said the woman, also coming to the window, frying-pan in hand. "There's nobody as ever we've seen related to the likes of him. Just look at the poor old unprotected soft one, and see what he's up to in the middle of the courtyard."

It must be confessed that the conduct of our friend Monsieur Tabaret was, to say the least, eccentric.

He had suddenly halted, and after taking off his hat, was rubbing his head violently, and gesticulating in a manner that was to a looker-on sufficiently ludicrous.

"No! no! no!" he murmured to himself. "I haven't got the clue to this affair. As the children say in their games, 'I burn, I burn!' but I have not had my hand upon it yet."

He mounted the staircase of the house, and rang at the door of the apartments he occupied, entirely forgetting that he had the latch-key in his pocket. His housekeeper hurried, not without surprise, to open it.

"Is it you, sir, at this early hour?"

"Eh! what?" asked her master, still pre-occupied. "What did you say?" repeated the old man.

"I say it is only half-past eight o'clock, and you rarely enter till long after midnight. It would not astonish me now if you hadn't dined."

"Certainly I have not. However, if you've nothing ready, Marie, it doesn't matter."

"Ah! that's just like you; as if a man's stomach was like a pair of bellows, to be filled only with wind. Luckily, I've the dinner you always order and never eat it, like a sensible man."

Daddy Tabaret, who was thoroughly accustomed to the rough honesty of his housekeeper, only smiled at this address, and took his seat with much docility at the table. It was the second phase in his eccentric life he was commencing. He raised the first spoonful of soup to his mouth, but it never got there.

The mystery of the Widow Lerouge again troubled his brain, and with his eyes half closed he remained like a statue of marble, his spoonful of soup suspended in the air.

"I begin to think that all the world must be right," thought Marie; "a man must be wrong in the upper story—he must have a tile off somewhere, when he ceases to care for a good dinner when it's placed before him."

As Daddy Tabaret still remained motionless in the same position, the housekeeper, losing patience, touched him on the shoulder, screaming into his ear, as if he were deaf. "Why don't you eat? Why don't you eat?"

"Eat! oh, certainly—yes, why not? Of course, I

ought to be hungry, very hungry, because, since this morning, I have been obliged to"—

He paused, as if struck by a thunderbolt, his mouth open, and his eyes fixed.

"I have it!" he cried; "yes, I have it at last!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE movement that accompanied the word recorded in our last chapter was so sudden and so violent, that Daddy Tabaret's housekeeper started as if she had been galvanized, and, hastily retreating to the door, waited, with a palpitating heart, for the further development of her master's sudden fit of madness.

"Yes," he continued, "I'm certain there's a child mixed up in it."

"A child mixed up in it! Good heavens!" thought Marie, "is he alluding to the soup?" And, fearful of the consequences, should it be made public, of this extraordinary delusion, she advanced quickly towards him for an explanation.

"A child, sir? What do you mean, sir?"

Her voice recalled Old Corkscrew to himself, and he perceived, for the first time, that he was being watched by Marie.

"What do you want?" he cried, in a voice of thunder; "and how dare you stand there, prying into my private business, and picking up the words that fell from my lips, to repeat them again to your gossiping friends? Retire to your kitchen, and don't come out of it till I call you!"

"The fit's on him," thought the poor woman. "He's becoming rabid!"—and, slamming the door behind her, she fled precipitately to the kitchen.

Daddy Tabaret retreated himself, and commenced swallowing, with extraordinary rapidity, spoonful after spoonful of the soup, which was now completely cold.

"How was it I never thought of that before? Poor humanity! I'm not worth much, after all! I'm getting old, and my ideas are not so fresh as they were; yet it's all as clear and palpable as the day. A fool might have guessed it!"

As he spoke, he struck a bell that lay upon the table, and Marie reappeared.

"The joint," he said; "bring in the joint, and leave me. I want to be alone. Yes," he went on, digging his knife with furious energy into a small leg of mutton,—"yes there's a child mixed up in it—I'm positive of it, and these are the circumstances. The Widow Lerouge was a servant in the service of a very rich lady. The husband, probably in the navy, leaves on a long journey. 'Frailty, thy name is woman!' as the English poet said. So the wife, during his absence, is false to her marriage vow. To hide the very natural consequences of her guilt, she confides her secret to the Widow Lerouge, and, with her assistance, hides the existence of her child from the knowledge of the world."

Here Old Corkscrew rang the bell violently.

"Marie! the dessert—and leave the room!"

Certainly our old friend hardly deserved the skill in cookery that Marie displayed in his behalf. He would have found it difficult, if called upon, to mention what he had eaten for dinner. Nay, he would have found it equally difficult, so much was he pre-occupied, to say what he was eating now.

"But the child!" he murmured slowly, masticating a spoonful of stewed pears. "The child! what has become of it? Did they kill it? No. Because then the Widow Lerouge would have been an accomplice to the infanticide, and therefore not to be feared as to betrayal. The father of the child must have wished it to live, and intrusted it to the care of the widow who nursed and brought it up. It was easy enough to take the child from her; but not quite so easy to destroy the proofs of its birth, and existence. There was the difficulty. The father was the man who came in the handsome carriage, and the mother was no other than the person who called once or twice with the aristocratic youth mentioned by the village gossips. No wonder that the dear old lady wanted for nothing. There are some secrets that are worth as much as a good piece of landed property."

"To get hush-money from two people at once was a lucky stroke of business for her; but she leant too heavily upon the prop of her declining years, and it broke. Poor, short-sighted woman! She must have threatened them, and in their fear they determined to get rid of her. But which of them undertook the business? The papa? No; he is too old. I've got it—it was the son! He wished to save the honor of his mother—so commenced by murdering the widow, and finished off by burning the proofs of his illegitimacy."

Marie, during the whole of this time, was airing her eye at the key-hole, alternating it every now and then by placing her ear to the same orifice. It was intensely aggravating and trying to her temper, however, to find she could not succeed in catching anything but a few incoherent words, interspersed, every now and then, with a mild oath or two, accompanied by sudden jumps in the air, and fist-shaking at invisible persons.

"It's very probable," she thought, "that some designing women have got hold of my poor master, and are endeavoring to persuade him he's the father of many of their children. Well, it serves him right, running after such disreputable people—at his time of life, too!"

She got into such a state of irritated curiosity at last, that she hazarded a soft tap at the door. No answer being forthcoming, she turned the handle and peeped in.

"Did you ring for coffee, sir?" she said, timidly.

"No; I didn't!" said Old Corkscrew, shortly; "but you can bring it in, all the same."

His usual cup of coffee being handed to him, Daddy Tabaret swallowed it off at one draught, and scalded himself so horribly in the process, that he was forced to dance a maniac dance of pain before the frightened Marie, who again fled precipitately.

"Thunder and lightning!" he gasped, at last; "but

it was hot, and no mistake! Bother the Widow Lerouge—she'll drive me crazy! Besides, I shall become a laughing-stock, if I go on in this way, to my detective friends! But which of them, after all, could have done what I have done, and by the sheer force of habit have built up the whole story, bit by bit? Not Gevrol—poor creature!—he's too obstinate! And at the thought of Gevrol, Daddy Tabaret rubbed his hands with delight. "Won't he be vexed? Won't he be humiliated? Won't he be sold? Shall I go off at once and communicate with Monsieur Daburon? No; on second thoughts, I'll sleep on it. I can manage my ideas better in the quiet of the night, and pick up the various little threads of the web I have been weaving. On the other hand, if I remain here all alone, I shall get too excited, and may have a rush of blood to the head. They say intense thought, directly after eating, is bad for the health. So I'll go out—Stop! What if I pay my old friend, Madame Gerdy, a visit? She has been ill lately, and will think it unkind if I don't call. I'll have a chat with Noel; it will help me to pass the time, and have a soothing influence on my nerves."

So saying, Daddy Tabaret arose, put on his overcoat, hat, and gloves, and informing Marie that he was uncertain as to his return, rang the bell at his friend's door.

CHAPTER IX.

THE home of Madame Gerdy was one of the highest respectability. She was comfortably off in her circumstances; and the rising position of her son at the bar had increased these circumstances into something like affluence.

Madame Gerdy lived a very retired life indeed, seldom seeing any company, with the exception of a few of Noel's friends who were occasionally invited to dinner. During the fifteen years that Daddy Tabaret had visited her, he had only met three people—the clergyman of the parish; an old schoolmaster who had taught Noel in his youth; and the brother of Madame Gerdy, a retired colonel in the army.

When these three visitors found themselves together, which was but rarely, they played a round game at cards; but Noel seldom remained after dinner—shutting himself up in his rooms, which were apart from those of his mother. He was known to prolong his studies of the law far into the night, and often in winter his lamp was only extinguished at dawn.

The mother and son lived but for one another; and those who knew them intimately spoke in terms of admiration and respect of the filial devotion of Noel—of the sacrifices he was supposed to make for her sake in living, at his age, the secluded and austere life of a hermit. The rest of Daddy Tabaret's tenants would often contrast the conduct of this grave, studious young man with that of their landlord, whom they looked upon as a gray-bearded Satan of incorrigible and irregular habits.

As for Madame Gerdy, she positively worshiped her son. In him she saw united every moral and physical perfection. If he spoke, she was silent, and listened. A word from him was law; a glance of his eye, a command. Her existence, in short, was passed in studying his tastes, divining his desires, forestalling his fancies, and enveloping him in the soft and tender atmosphere of maternal love.

But to return to Daddy Tabaret. "Is Madame Gerdy at home?" he asked of the servant who opened the door; and without waiting for a reply, went in, with the confidence of a man who knows the house he visits, and is almost sure to be welcome.

A single wax candle was burning in the drawing-room, which was not in its accustomed order. The round table that generally stood in the middle of the apartment had been pushed into a corner. The large arm-chair of Madame Gerdy was near the window, instead of in its accustomed place by the chimney corner. The volunteer of the detective police took in all these details at a glance.

"Has anything unusual happened to-day?" he asked of the servant.

"Oh, don't speak of it, sir—don't speak of it, sir!" said the girl, mysteriously. "We've all had such a fright; it's quite upset me; I can assure you, and made me all of a tremble."

"Why, what has been the matter?"

"Well, you know, sir, how ill missus has been for the last month, eating nothing, so to speak, and so nervous that she couldn't sleep a wink at nights. Why, this very morning as never was, she says to me, she says—"

"Oh, well well!" said Old Corkscrew; "I don't want to hear about the morning. What about the evening?"

Rather disappointed at being thus checked in her bit of gossip, the servant went on to explain that her mistress had gone after dinner into the drawing-room as usual, and, seating herself in her arm-chair, had begun reading the newspaper. Hardly had she commenced the first lines when she gave a scream of such a piercing character that it echoed through the house. On rushing to ascertain the cause, Madame Gerdy was found lying senseless on the carpet. Her son raised her and carried her in his arms to her bed-chamber. "I wanted to run for the doctor," added the girl, "but the young master wouldn't let me. He said he knew what was the matter."

"And how is she now?"

"She's recovered her senses—that is, I suppose she has, for Monsieur Noel made me leave the room—in fact, quite pushed me out of it. All I know is that just now she was speaking very loud—so loud that I could hear her in the kitchen. Ah, sir, it's very extraordinary, all the same!"

"What's very extraordinary?"

"What missus said to Monsieur Noel."

"Ah! my girl!" sneered Daddy Tabaret; "so we listen at doors, do we?"

"No, sir; I would not condescend to bemean myself to such baseness!" said the servant, coloring; "but missus was almost shrieking out her words. She said—"

"My good girl," said Daddy Tabaret, severely, "listeners hear no good of themselves. Ask Marie—she's had great experience in such matters—and she'll tell you all about it."

The servant was beginning a long explanation, when the old man stopped her.

"Enough—enough!" he said; "go back to your work. Don't disturb Monsieur Noel by telling him I am here. I can easily wait his coming."

And, much satisfied with the little lesson he had just been giving, he picked up the newspaper, and seating himself in the chimney corner, drew the candle a little nearer, and began to read.

CHAPTER X.

A MINUTE had hardly passed, before Daddy Tabaret in his turn sprang to his feet, and stifled a cry of instinctive fear and surprise.

This is the paragraph which met his eyes:

"A crime of the most horrible nature has just been committed in the little village of La Jonchere, and has plunged its peacable inhabitants into the utmost consternation. A widow, named Lerouge, who was much esteemed in the neighborhood, has been murdered in her own house, under the most mysterious circumstances. The police were immediately informed of the case, and, we have every reason to believe, are upon the track of the assassin or assassins."

"Thunder and lightning!" thought Old Corkscrew. "Is it possible that Madame Gerdy—"

This idea only crossed him like a flash of lightning. He was ashamed of it immediately after, and returned to his arm-chair, shrugging his shoulders, as he murmured, "I think I am rapidly developing into an idiot! This Widow Lerouge has become a sort of walking nightmare! I can't get her out of my thoughts!"

A curiosity over which he had no control, and which common sense made him despise, prompted him to read the newspaper right through, from beginning to end.

There was nothing in it, except the paragraph above mentioned, which could in any way justify or account for the fainting fit or the scream—or, in fact, any emotion whatever.

"It is a very singular coincidence, all the same. I don't care who says to the contrary," said the incorrigible old detective.

He also observed that the paper had been slightly torn towards the bottom page, and crumpled, as with the convulsive clutch of a human hand.

Again he repeated, between his teeth, "It's strange—very strange!"

At this moment, a door in the drawing-room, leading to Madame Gerdy's sleeping chamber, was softly opened, and Noel appeared upon the threshold.

In all probability the sudden illness of his mother had much affected him, for he was very pale, and his face, which usually wore a calm and self-possessed expression, was flushed and troubled.

He seemed rather surprised on perceiving Daddy Tabaret.

"Ah, my dear boy!" said the old man; "I'm so glad to see you, for you can ease my mind about your mother. How is she?"

"Madame Gerdy is as well as can be expected."

"Madame Gerdy!" repeated the old man, astonished at the stiffness of the reply. "Come—come, I see you've had a great shock, and haven't recovered from it yet."

"Yes, indeed!" repeated the young barrister, sinking into a chair, and passing his hand over his forehead; "I've had a tremendous shock."

It was very apparent that Noel was making the greatest efforts to appear calm, to listen quietly to his visitor and to answer his questions connectedly.

Daddy Tabaret in his anxiety perceived nothing of this, and entreated his friend to tell him the cause of his mother's illness.

The young man hesitated for a moment, as though he were consulting with himself as to the propriety of replying to so decided a question. After a long pause, he said, "You are an old friend, Daddy Tabaret, and we have few secrets from you. Madame Gerdy was overwhelmed by an announcement in the papers of the sudden and violent death of a woman whom she knew and loved."

"Thunder and lightning!" stammered Old Corkscrew.

In fact, he was so stupefied for the moment that he was almost betraying his connection with the police, and was on the point of exclaiming, "What! your mother knew the Widow Lerouge?" when his presence of mind returned, and he placed his hands over his eyes, to hide the gleam of intense satisfaction that sparkled in them at thus being on the high road to discover something of the past life of the victim of La Jonchere.

"Yes, Madame Gerdy knew the Widow Lerouge," continued Noel. "The widow was her slave—body and soul her slave. At a sign of her hand she would have thrown herself into the flames."

"Then you, my dear boy, must also have known this worthy woman."

"I had not seen her for a very long time," answered Noel, whose voice seemed veiled and husky from extreme and sad emotion; "but I knew her well. I ought to add—in fact, I don't mind confessing to you that I loved her dearly. It was very natural; she had been my wet nurse when an infant."

"The—that woman?" gasped Daddy Tabaret.

This time the poor old fellow felt almost dizzy. What! the Widow Lerouge the nurse of Noel!

It was too good to be true. Providence had evi-

dently taken him by the hand as its chosen instrument.

His agonies of doubt—his despair at obtaining further proofs—seemed nigh over; and, overwhelmed at his success, he bent before Noel, silent and amazed.

His subtle common sense, however, told him that he must bide his time, and not compromise himself as yet—which it was very evident he would do unless he made some remark, however commonplace, concerning the revelation just made to him by the young barrister. So he cleared his throat, and said, in as quiet a tone as he could assume, "What a great misfortune!"

"I cannot answer for Madame Gerdy," answered Noel, gloomily; "but for me it's a misfortune beyond all calculation. I am stabbed to the heart by the same blow that has struck the poor widow. Her death, Monsieur Tabaret, has destroyed all my dreams in the future, and has, perhaps, crushed forever my most justifiable hopes. I had the most cruel outrage to revenge, but this sudden death has snapped the weapons I held in my hand, and has reduced me to helpless, hopeless despair. Ah! I am, indeed, most unfortun-

ate."

"You unfortunate—You unhappy?" cried Daddy

Tabaret, deeply moved at the sorrow of one he loved so well. "In the name of Heaven, what has happened?"

"I suffer!" murmured the barrister. "Oh, how I suffer, when I think of it all! Not only will the injustice that has been shown to me be never repaired, but I am left without defense against the bitterest calumny. The world can now say that I have been guilty of a series of knavish tricks; that I am an ambitious adventurer, without common modesty, and without common honor."

Daddy Tabaret hardly knew what to think. How could there be any association between the honor of Noel and the murder at La Jonchere? A thousand ideas, each one dissimilar to the other, seemed jumbled in his brain.

"Come! come, my boy!" he said cheerily; "compose yourself. How can calumny ever reach you? Keep up your spirits. Thunder and lightning! haven't you got friends? Have I deserted you? Trust in me; tell me the cause of your sorrow, and the devil's in the case if we two can't strike out a something that will—"

Before the old man could finish his sentence the barrister rose suddenly, as if struck with a sudden resolution.

"Well, yes!" he interrupted. "Yes; you shall know all! I am weary of bearing the burden of a secret that is choking me. The part I am playing overwhelms and disgusts me. I want a friend who can console and encourage me—a friend also who is capable of advising; for we are bad judges of our own causes, and this matter plunges me into an abyss of doubt and hesitation."

"You know," answered Daddy simply, "that I am always at your service, and have your interests at heart as much as if you were my own son. Make use of me in any way you may think proper, and I shall be only too happy if it is in my power to serve you."

The barrister pressed the old man's hands between his own.

"You must know, then"—he commenced. "But, no; not here. We may be overheard. Come into my study."

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN Noel and Daddy Tabaret were seated facing one another in the barrister's private room, and when the door had been carefully looked for fear of intrusion, the latter remarked uneasily to the young man that, perhaps his mother might require his presence, and feel hurt at his absence.

"If Madame Gerdy rings the bell," was the cold reply, made in a short, dry tone, "the servant will answer it."

The indifference of his manner, the icy disdain of his voice, astounded Daddy Tabaret, accustomed as he had been to the affectionate relations that had hitherto existed between mother and son.

"For pity's sake, Noel," he said, "be calm, and don't allow yourself to be led away by any momentary irritation. I see you are annoyed with your mother; by tomorrow you will have forgotten the cause of that annoyance. In the meantime, drop the icy tone you have adopted in speaking of her—it doesn't please me; and why this affectation in calling her Madame Gerdy?"

"Why?" echoed the barrister, in a hollow voice,—"why?"

He rose as he spoke, paced the room for a few seconds in an absent, uncertain sort of way, and then, returning, stood close beside the old man.

"Because, Monsieur Tabaret, Madame Gerdy is not my mother!"

His words fell like the blow of a heavy club upon the head of Daddy Tabaret. He was stunned, and for some moments sat staring at his young friend, as one paralyzed.

"Oh!" said he at last, in an expostulating way, as if the words he had last heard were beyond all possibility of belief; "reflect upon what you are saying, my dear boy! Think how improbable it is—how utterly incredible!"

"Yes; I own it is incredible," answered Noel, speaking with a certain emphasis, and dwelling on each word in a manner which was familiar to him. "It may seem improbable, yet it is true. For thirty-three years—from the day of my birth, in fact—Madame Gerdy has been playing a wonderful comedy—ought I not to call it a tragedy?—to my detriment, and to the profit of her own son—for she has a son, as I am about to prove to you."

"My dear boy, you may speak to me unreservedly," began Daddy Tabaret, who, in the dim distance, caught a more distinct glimpse of the phantom of the Widow Lerouge.

But Noel was not listening—indeed, seemed hardly in a condition to listen.

This young man, ordinarily so severe and cold, so walled round with an icy reserve of manner, appeared to have entirely lost his self-command. The sound of his words seemed to lash him into frenzy, as the ring of his harness bell fires the blood of a spirited horse.

"Was there ever a man in this world more cruelly deceived than I have been—more miserably or more shamefully duped?"

He spoke with a glowing excitement, pacing the room with hasty strides, not glancing at the queer, attentive face that was looking at him so steadily.

"To think," he continued, "that her perfidy dates from the moment she took me on her knees, kissing my baby forehead as she called me 'her son'! Her love for me—her love, so cunningly professed, was hypocrisy, her devotion to my welfare a serpent's cunning, assumed the better to betray!"

"But what end had she in view? What were her motives," asked Daddy Tabaret. "No one acts in the way you describe without a motive, and that a powerful one."

Noel clenched both his hands tightly together, with a bitter laugh.

"Her motive was that her *own* son might enjoy what rightly belonged to me."

"Her son!" echoed his listener.

"That, unsuspected, he should assume a great name—a very great name! *My* name, Monsieur Tabaret, with a fortune to maintain it—an immense fortune!—Yes!—high name!—great wealth!—grand position! This perfidious woman has robbed me of all!"

"Ha!" thought Daddy Tabaret, in whom the spirit of the detective began to be excited, and whose subtle nose already scented some great secret—"ha! the cork is beginning to move at last!"

This was what he thought. What he said was as follows: "A serious accusation, my dear boy—a very serious accusation! And to believe it one must give Madame Gerdy the credit for a mingled audacity and cunning rarely combined in one and the same person. To have conceived, and to have successfully carried out, such a scheme as the one you charge her with, she must have been advised, directed and held in check by some more powerful intelligence than her own. She must have had accomplices—and able ones, too! It's impossible that she could have acted alone! Why even her husband?"

"Her husband!" interrupted the young barrister, with another derisive laugh. "And you believe in her pathetic story of a long widowhood—of weeds and tears—weeping willows, marble tombs, grass-grown graves—and all the paraphernalia which makes up what society calls a respectable death! Her husband has ceased to exist—simply because he never existed!"

Noel paused.

He seemed annihilated by the tempest of his own passion, as under the strong breast of the hurricane the turbulent sea assumes for a moment a terrible calm.

He looked at Daddy Tabaret as expecting some outburst of feeling on his part; but the old man's eyes were bent upon the ground, and his long, sinewy hands clasped his knees.

He was meditating profoundly.

There was no perceptible emotion of any kind in his face when, after a few minutes' pause, he raised his calm eyes and fixed them on the bloodshot ones of his young friend.

"Don't let us wander from the subject. You are young; youth is impulsive. You ask my advice. Well, without any undue boasting, you might ask the same thing of many, and would get worse; but when aiming at a target, the skillful marksman strikes the bull's-eye at once."

Here the old man moved his chair forward, and darted rather than spoke his words.

"May I ask how you've gathered all this curious information? By what means have you obtained possession of this most extraordinary knowledge? Hearsay is not evidence. Suspicion is often but a foolish nightmare which tortures while it deceives. Have you proofs? If you haven't, I refuse to listen to such charges against one whom I have always respected. If you have proofs, then I have a right, considering the position in which you have placed me, to demand them."

"I have proofs."

"Since when?"

"I've known all I've told you for the last three weeks."

"How did you obtain your proofs?"

"By accident. I have enough to make any unprejudiced mind morally certain of the truth of what I state. They are but moral proofs, I know; but a word—one word only of the Widow Lerouge would have turned the scale, and before the world, even with the most skeptical, have made those proofs decisive."

"Which word," commented Daddy Tabaret, "the respectable lady in question cannot, under the circumstances, pronounce."

"Because those who dreaded that she would do so, have killed her!" cried Noel, passionately. "They have killed her, in order to shut her mouth forever; and now Madame Gerdy will deny all. I know her! Were her head upon the block, and the axe within an inch of her neck, she would deny all—all! My father, also, without doubt, will refuse to own me! I have papers—substantial evidence—here, under my hand, when this woman's murder scatters my hopes to the winds, and nullifies them all!"

Daddy Tabaret shook his head, and mused for a moment.

"You talk of proofs, proofs, proofs! What are these proofs? Two heads are better than one; but before I give you advice, I must know everything you have to communicate."

"You shall."

Noel paused, glanced at the windows and door, drew his chair nearer to that of his old friend, and spoke in a distinct tone, though still in a whisper.

CHAPTER XII.

"THREE weeks ago," continued Noel, "I was in want of some papers of importance, which I had placed in the old bureau, in Madame Gerdy's room. Missing the key, I had to resort to forcing the lock. While doing so, a random blow of the hammer caused the chisel I was using to slide from the place where it was inserted, and strike with much violence against a neighboring part of the bureau. To my astonishment, the blow moved a small panel, which I had supposed to be backed by the solid wood. I examined it, inserted the edge of the chisel in the crack or crevice so suddenly discovered, and pushed aside the little panel without much difficulty."

The recess was filled with papers—so crammed, in fact, that they fell out, and were scattered on the desk.

An instinct, a mere mechanical instinct, impossible for me to explain, led me to take up one of the letters—for they were letters—and, it being unsealed, to open and glance at its contents."

Old Corkscrew shook his head. "You were wrong," he murmured, looking at his young friend gravely; "wrong—very wrong!"

"Granted; but what is done cannot be undone. I read the letter, and before I had mastered six lines of it, I was aware that the letter was written by my father—my father, of whom Madame Gerdy, despite my prayers and entreaties, had refused to let me know even the name."

Here the young man paused, and looked appealingly in his listener's face.

"You must not blame me; you can hardly realize the hunger, nay, the anguish of curiosity, that possessed me. I closed the secret panel, gathered up the letters, and hurried away to my room to read them, one by one."

"A curiosity which has already been cruelly punished, my poor boy," said Daddy Tabaret, surveying the working face of the other with a sadness that was full of pity.

"In my place, who could have resisted such a temptation? It was those very letters that gave me the proofs I spoke to you about just now."

"You have the letters, of course?"

"Safely; you may be sure. You're my only friend. I've no secrets from you. You shall see them—nay, you must read them!"

The young barrister opened one of the drawers of his desk, touched a secret spring, and drew from a recess a small packet of letters, which he handed to Old Corkscrew.

Now, giving way to his natural and ardent curiosity, and placing his wonderfully "detective-looking" spectacles upon his queer nose, the Daddy settled himself comfortably in his chair, and unfastened the string that was round the papers.

He took up the first letter that came to his hand, and in obedience to a gesture of Noel's began to read.

"My darling Valerie!"

"Valerie," remarked the barrister, between his teeth, "is the name of Madame Gerdy!"

"I know—I know!—pray don't interrupt me!" said the old man. "I will read each letter in my own way, and we can comment upon the whole afterwards."

The reading of the first letter concluded, the Daddy stroked his chin for some moments before he spoke.

"This letter," he murmured to himself, and not addressing his anxious listener, as he folded it carefully and placed it aside—"this letter expresses, in burning words the writer's deep love for the beautiful Valerie."

"Valerie Gerdy!"

"I'm not speaking to you. I'm only making notes—notes on my own account. With your permission, I'll read all the letters through, and we'll postpone our decision till the reading is over."

Then, with a methodical calmness, very irritating to the nerves of the impatient Noel, Monsieur Tabaret read letter after letter, now and then pausing to make a pencil note of something that had particularly struck him, till the last one was concluded and placed with the others.

"A strange story," he muttered—"a very strange story—a romantic and a sad one."

"And what do you advise?"

"Stop a bit, my impetuous young friend—just stop a bit and let me run over the simple facts. If you think I've got them clearly, why, then we'll proceed to discuss them."

Half closing his eyes, but very keenly watchful nevertheless, Daddy Tabaret leant back in his chair, crossed one leg over the other, then clasped his thin, restless hands over his knees, and spoke as follows: Noel listening with a nervous yet absorbed attention, hanging, as it were, upon the words as they fell from the old man's lips.

CHAPTER XIII.

"THESE, then, are the facts—the simple facts," commenced his friend, "as far as I can glean them from the pile of letters I've just perused; and if you'll allow me, I'll repeat them to you in 'sensation' paragraphs, after the fashion of some of our favorite novelists. Your father, the possessor of a great name—I surmise this, though the letter is without signature—and an immense fortune, while yet a very young man, devotedly loved a young girl."

"The young girl was far beneath him in birth and worldly position. Unable to marry her without the consent of his parents; the love of the young people took a wrong direction."

"Valerie Gerdy, yielding to a fatal impulse, lived with your father as his wife though without the right of that sacred title."

"Diplomatic relations took him to Italy, and there, in the absence of Valerie, who remained alone in France, notwithstanding his most ardent desire that she should accompany him, one of those grand marriages was formed by his aristocratic family, which consists in simply bringing two great names and an unlimited quantity of land together, utterly irrespective of any of the nobler feelings of the heart."

"To judge by the tone of the letters it proved a most unhappy union, bringing in its train sorrow, sin, shame, and death."

Old Corkscrew paused for a moment, as if searching for a new point to start from in his story.

"What were your father's motives," he asked, breaking silence at last, "for his lengthened stay abroad?"

"My father," answered the young barrister, "notwithstanding his age, was an intimate friend of Charles the Tenth, and had undertaken a secret mission for him in Italy. My father is the Count Lionel de Valcourt."

Daddy Tabaret started.

The name pronounced by Noel was one of the most ancient in France, and had, hitherto, been handed down without blemish or stain from father to son until the present time.

"Yes," continued the young man, in a low voice, taking up one of the letters, and glancing at its date. "It was at Naples, in the middle of the month of May, 1829, that my father, a man in full possession of his intellect—a statesman, celebrated for his wily policy—a gentleman of high birth and education, led away by an absorbing passion, committed to paper a scheme as monstrous as it was unjust!"

"Stop a bit—stop a bit!" again said Daddy Tabaret. "Let's stick to the bare and simple facts, which are as follows:—Two children were born in the same month of the same year. One the child of the poor girl called Valerie; the other of the Countess de Valcourt."

"At the instigation of the Count Lionel de Valcourt, the children were changed, and the real heir to his name and estates was consigned to the care of Valerie, whilst her child was brought up as the future Count."

"The accomplices in this scheme were Germain, the Count's valet; a wet nurse, named Claudine Lerouge; the Count himself; and, of course, Valerie."

"The manner in which the plan was executed was simple and effective."

"The two children, a few days after their respective births, were sent in the care of two wet-nurses into Normandy, where the De Valcourt estates are situated. These women were, of course, unknown to each other."

"An accident on the road, previously arranged by Germain, the valet, who accompanied the nurse who had taken charge of the Countess's little son, caused the two women to pass the night in the same room at a wayside inn, where the change was effected."

"A munificent reward for her services had been given to Claudine Lerouge, the wife of an honest, but poor sailor, who carefully kept the secret, and tenderly nursed the child of Valerie, who was thus brought up as the future heir of the Count and Countess."

"Am I right so far?" asked Daddy Tabaret.

Noel bent his head in token of acquiescence.

"And now," said Old Corkscrew, suddenly sitting bolt upright in his chair, and fixing his piercing eyes on the pale face of his young friend, "where are your proofs?"

Noel took back the packet of letters, replaced them in his desk, and then looked steadily into the sharp countenance that was peering into his own.

"Suppose," he said, slowly, and in measured accents, "that all the proofs I possess in the world stop here. What then?"

Daddy Tabaret took some minutes before he answered this question. He was weighing the strength of the circumstantial evidence contained in the letters of the Count de Valcourt.

"Speaking from my own impression," he said, at last, "I'm convinced that you're not the son of Madame Gerdy."

Noel seized his hand, and shook it warmly.

"Thank you—thank you!" he burst out, with a joyful energy. "You were never more sure in your life, and I'm sure the world will be on my side when it is made acquainted with my sad story."

Daddy Tabaret watched him as he commenced pacing the room, talking the while in a quick, excited way, and waited for further information.

"Of course you may guess," he went on, "that I sought out Claudine Lerouge. She loved me, poor thing! She had suckled me, and my life, as it were, had become a part of hers. She knew the injustice of which I had been the innocent victim, and her honest heart bled for me. Need I tell you the thought of her complicity in the nefarious scheme weighed heavily upon her conscience? Remorse, like a viper, was gnawing at her vitals—the burden laid upon her in her old age was too heavy for her to bear. When I questioned her, she was deeply moved, and confessed to me—whom she so devotedly loved—the whole plot. Three days after my birth the end they had in view was attained, and I—I, a poor, helpless infant, was deprived of my birthright, of a mother's love, and a father's care. Poor Claudine Lerouge! poor, faithful nurse! she at least remained my friend, and promised to come forward as a witness whenever I wished to assert my rights."

"And she is dead; and her secret buried with her!" groaned the old man, covering his face with his hands.

"But still," argued Noel, eagerly and anxiously, "I may have a chance left, you know. I won't throw up the sponge as yet."

"Quite right—quite right!" murmured his listener. "I like a brave heart—I like courage and perseverance."

"The widow," pursued the other, "possessed letters

of importance—foolish, imprudent, compromising letters, some written by my father, some by Madame Gerdy. I know this to be a fact, for I've had them in my hands. I've read them. Claudine even wished to place them in my keeping. Fool! fool that I was to refuse them!"

Alas! there was no chance left in that quarter. Nobody was better aware of it than Daddy Tabaret.

These letters, of course, had been the *motive* of the murder at the village of La Jonchere.

The assassin had found and burned them, with the rest of the widow's papers, in the little stove already described in the first chapters of this story.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE old volunteer detective was once more on the trail. Still there was a flaw in the evidence he was collecting in his own mind.

"It appears to me," he said, after a pause, "that knowing your hard struggles to gain an honest independence, your father has scarcely kept his word as to the dazzling promises he made to Madame Gerdy about your future."

"He never kept his word at all," answered the other, shaking his head sadly.

"Well, I never!" cried Daddy Tabaret, indignantly. "If I don't think he has behaved worse than all the rest!"

"Spare my father!" said Noel, quickly. "Recollect that he befriended Madame Gerdy for many years afterwards."

"Did you ever see him?" interrupted his friend.

"Yes. I can still remember being visited when at college by a tall man, with a handsome face, and cold, haughty manners, who could have been no other than the Count Lionel de Valcourt. But the day at last came when he broke off all correspondence with the once adored and beautiful Valerie."

"Oh, of course!—of course!" sneered Daddy Tabaret. "A man in his position—one of the old nobility, you know—he could afford to do a dirty action!"

"Stop," interrupted the barrister, with dignity, "before you judge him too hastily, and you will see that he was not to blame."

So saying he handed another letter to Old Corkscrew.

This letter was more crumpled and worn than the rest, and the writing appeared blotted in many places, as with tears.

Its folds were nearly divided from much use, as though it had been read and re-read many and many a weary time.

It intimated, in a few lines, that the Count had become cognizant of the fact that Valerie was on the point of accepting proposals of marriage from a rich tradesman in her neighborhood; and that in consequence of this, she must consider that in future all relations whatsoever between them were at an end.

In her replies, the unfortunate woman indignantly denied the insinuation, but her letters were returned unopened. She tried to obtain an interview with the Count, but in vain, and was at last informed by his solicitor that an income of £150 a-year would be settled upon her, on condition that she ceased all further claims upon his client.

"So you see, old friend," commented Noel, as the faded, sad-looking letter joined its companions in misfortune in the pack—"so you see, Valerie's son had taken my place, and my hopes are destroyed for ever!"

He was interrupted by some one knocking at the door.

"Who's there?" he asked, without rising from his seat.

"Oh, if you please, sir," said the voice of the servant outside, "do come! Poor missus has been asking for you this 'alf-hour; but I told her you was engaged. She's been asking for you again!"

The barrister turned very red, and then very pale—half rose from his seat, then sunk back again, as if irresolute what course to pursue.

"Go to her!—go to her at once, my boy!" said Daddy Tabaret, energetically. "Don't be unkind and unforgiving! Leave those unpleasant feelings to bigots and narrow-minded people. It's a privilege that belongs to them."

Noel rose with an evident reluctance and repugnance; then placing his hand over his heart, as if to still its painful throbbing, went into Madame Gerdy's rooms.

CHAPTER XV.

His young friend had hardly left the room, before Daddy Tabaret had risen to his feet, and commenced pacing the little study.

"Poor fellow!" thought the old man. "What a sad discovery! Such a fine-hearted chap, too! He's so generous, so candid, he hasn't the meanness to suspect anybody. But, thank goodness! I'm to the fore. I'll find out all about it. I partly guess who has done it; but how has it been led up to? There's the rub! He'll tell me more, presently, without suspecting the interest I take in his words."

His eyes had again alighted on the packet of letters which Noel had left behind him on the table.

"Ah!" he sighed, "if I could only have one of those letters just twenty-four hours! Of course, he knows the exact number, and if I asked him for one, it might lead, in some way, to a betrayal of my connection with the police."

Old Corkscrew took another turn, and stopped again in front of the letters.

"Yes; I'll take one. Out of evil cometh good. I shall now be able to compare the handwriting at my leisure."

Daddy Tabaret had hardly succeeded in thrusting one

of the letters into his capacious pocket when the barrister reappeared.

He was one of those men, the hinges of whose character, so to speak, have been so well oiled that they bend, but never break.

He was a complete master of his emotions, having exercised himself in hiding his thoughts and feelings from others to such an extent that dissimulation came to him as second nature. In short, he was convinced, and perhaps, after all, he was right, that dissimulation is the indispensable armor of an ambitious man.

Nothing, therefore, in his manner, as he entered the room, betrayed what had passed between him and his reputed mother.

His face was calm, his voice steady, and his whole demeanor as unruffled as if he had but just returned from a common-place consultation with one of his clients.

"Well," asked Daddy Tabaret, anxiously, "how is she?"

"Worse!" answered Noel—"much worse! She is delirious now, and doesn't know what she is saying. She loads me with the most dreadful reproaches, and treats me as though I were a monster not fit to approach her. I'm positive she's going mad!"

"It's not to be wondered at!" murmured the old man. "Poor thing—poor thing!" Then he added, "I hope you've sent for a doctor."

"I've just done so, and expect his arrival each moment."

As he spoke he sat down before his study table, and commenced putting his letters in order, arranging each according to its date, and in separate packets, without discovering the missing one appropriated by Daddy Tabaret. This done, he placed them in the secret drawer of his desk, and having carefully locked it, rose, and began pacing the room, as if by continual movement he thought to calm the internal fever that seemed bubbling in his veins.

"Yes, she thought to impose upon me—to trick me! As if she could succeed with such proofs as I hold!"

"She has probably warned the Count, and placed him on his guard," said Daddy Tabaret, still pursuing his detective hobby.

"It's very likely; but she can't have succeeded. The Count is away from home, and won't return till the end of the week."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I wished to see my father—to speak to him!"

"You?"

"And why not? Do you think I'm going to give up the fight before it has hardly commenced? Do you think that, robbed, despoiled, and betrayed, I will not raise my voice in protest? What delicacy of sentiment should hold me back? Why shouldn't I speak?"

"Of course!—of course!" assented Old Corkscrew, trying to soothe him down. "It's all right—it's only human nature—so you can't be far out. So you called on the Count, then?"

"Yes, after weeks of irresolution—weeks of mental anguish and torture—I decided upon seeing my father. Oh, how I suffered during that short time! I gave up work, pretending to my clients that I was ill. In the day I took walks of twenty to thirty miles, hoping in this way to gain some rest in the long, weary nights; but in vain! From the time those letters fell into my hands, I have never slept an hour!"

Daddy Tabaret was getting restless. From time to time he drew his watch secretly from his pocket, and fidgeted about in his chair. "Lor! lor!" he thought; "how these young people do talk! I shall miss the magistrate; he'll be in bed by the time I get away!" And he suppressed a groan of impatience as he prepared to listen for "further particulars" on the part of his excited friend.

"At last, one morning," continued Noel, "after a night of deep thought and misery, I made up my mind; I sent for a cab, and was driven to the Count's house."

The old volunteer detective gave a sigh of satisfaction and relief.

At last he was coming to the point.

"Well, sir," said Noel, speaking in his most important manner, "the Count de Valcourt's mansion is one of the most magnificent of those stately edifices that grace the Faubourg St. Germain."

"Ah!" said Daddy Tabaret, taking his snuff with an aggravating indifference. "It's a jolly thing to be rich?"

"A princely residence," continued the other, not heeding the remark; "worthy of a great lord, and a grand gentleman. In fact, it might have been almost called a palace. I entered at first a wide court-yard; to the left and right were the stables, filled with horses of the finest breed. At the end rose the frontage of the mansion, majestic and serene, with its great bay windows, and its grand stone terraces. Behind the stately edifice extended a large flower garden—I might almost call it a park—shaded by ancient trees almost as old as my ancestry."

This high-flown speech—this overdrawn description—this absurd enthusiasm, annoyed Daddy Tabaret beyond everything.

"I'm afraid he's a snob, after all!" sighed his queer old friend; "but what am I to do? I can't—in fact, I dare not shut him up. One unguarded word on my part might arouse his suspicions, and, like a flash of lightning, awaken him to the truth—namely, that he's not speaking to a friend; but to an accomplice of Gevrol, the detective!"

"When I arrived," went on Noel, "a footman, in crimson and gold, opened the door, who, in answer to my demand, informed me that the Count Lionel de Valcourt was in the country, but that the Viscount, his son, was at home. This rather upset the programme I had laid down for myself; but having gone thus far, I did not feel inclined to recede. I insisted, in default of the father, upon seeing the son. After being passed on to several other servants, I was confided to the care of a

valet, who begged me to follow him into the presence of his master."

"At last," murmured Old Corkscrew, with another sigh of relief, and politely suppressing a contemplated yawn.

"I was now conducted," Noel continued, "into a small and simply furnished room, whose only adornment consisted in old armor and arms of every kind and sort. I don't think in all my life I've seen such a variety. Guns, pistols, swords, daggers, and foils of all shapes and qualities were scattered about—in short, I should have thought myself in the arsenal of a fencing master."

The arm that had been used by the assassin of the Widow Lerouge flashed across the memory of the old detective.

"The Viscount," said Noel, "was half seated, or rather half lying on the sofa. He's a good-looking fellow, with dignified yet easy manners, and carries well the name which by right belongs to me. He's about my height, with brown hair and eyes like myself, and there's a strong resemblance between us—stronger, perhaps, if he didn't wear a beard and mustache. He looks much younger than I do, by the way, and that's not to be wondered at. I've worked, suffered, and struggled, whilst he has had nothing to do but eat, drink, and sleep."

"You must have felt horribly nervous and queer," put in Daddy Tabaret.

"Not the least in the world. I felt less than I do now. Ten days of mental anguish and sleepless nights prepare a fellow for the worst. The moment I entered I broke the ice at once. 'Sir' I said, 'I'm a perfect stranger to you; but my personality is a mere trifle compared with the importance of the mission with which I am charged.'"

"He arose at once, and placing the cigarette he was smoking on the mantle-piece, stood leaning against its marble shelf."

"The mission I have come upon is sad and serious; and one that deeply concerns the honor of the name you bear."

"He seemed hardly to understand me, and with a tone of haughty impertinence, asked me 'if I thought I should be long.'"

"Yes," I replied, shortly.

Daddy Tabaret had become exceedingly attentive.

"Don't omit the slightest detail," he said. "It's most important you should put me in full possession of the facts."

"The Viscount appeared awfully annoyed," continued Noel. "I'm sorry you're going to be long," he objected. "The fact is, my time is not my own. I'm engaged to be married to a young lady, Mademoiselle d'Arange, a fact which I believe has already been announced, and am expected to lunch in half an hour from this. Can't you postpone our interview?"

"Hilloh!" said Old Corkscrew to himself; "here's another woman cropping up! I wonder if she's had anything to do with the mystery?"

"I answered that the explanation I had to make would admit of no delay; and as I saw by the expression of his face that he was about to dismiss me, I brought out my packet of letters, and, drawing one out of the pack, presented it to him. He recognized the handwriting of his father at once, declared himself at my service, asking me politely to allow him to write a few lines of excuse to the lady who expected him to luncheon."

"He wrote a few lines in haste, gave them to his valet, with orders to deliver them immediately to the Duchess d'Arange, and then, rising, asked me to follow him into the library."

"One word," interrupted old Corkscrew; "did he seem much upset on seeing the letters?"

"Not the least in the world? He was as cool as a cucumber. After carefully shutting the door, he pointed to an arm-chair, begging me to be seated, whilst he threw himself upon a sofa with the most perfect ease in the world."

"And now, sir," he began, "will you have the goodness to explain yourself?"

"I had prepared, and, so to speak, primed myself, for the interview, and had decided not to beat about the bush, but to strike a decisive blow at once."

"Sir," I said, "my mission is a most painful one. In fact, of such a nature that I hardly know how or where to begin."

"Indeed!" he said, half laughing and raising his eyebrows; "it takes a great deal to surprise or alarm me. I've capital nerves, and don't know what palpitation of the heart means."

"I'm glad to hear it," I answered, very gravely. "I won't detain you long; I simply wish you to read these letters." And, as I spoke, I rose and advanced towards him.

"Sir," I went on, "I am a barrister, and have the intricacies of the law at my fingers' ends."

"I beg you will proceed," he said, the smile dying out of his face; "I'm all impatience to hear the news you have to tell me."

"Sir," I continued, "these letters will prove to you that you are not the real heir to the Valcourt estates, and are the illegitimate son of the Count Lionel de Valcourt. The rightful heir exists, and it is he who now asserts his claim!"

"He bounded to his feet like a tiger, and, for a moment, I thought he was about to spring at my throat, but he recovered himself instantly, and in a voice that was almost a whisper, asked for the letters."

"Without a moment's hesitation, I handed them to him."

"What!" half screamed Old Corkscrew; "you don't mean to say you had the folly, the imprudence, to hand him the real ones—the *originals*, I mean?"

"Never fear," said the barrister, in a low voice, and compressing his lips as he spoke. "I was there, and had prepared myself for any emergency."

There was such an expression of concentrated firm-

ness and ferocity in Noel's face that Daddy Tabaret recoiled instinctively.

"He would have strangled him," he thought, "had he attempted any treachery!"

The barrister went on with his recital.

"What I did for you, old friend, I did for the Viscount Albert de Valcourt—spared him the tedium of reading through a hundred and fifty-six letters. I told him to peruse only those that were marked with a cross in red ink."

"And you did quite right, my boy. You had placed him on the rack, but kindly shortened the torture."

"He was now seated," continued Noel, "before a small *papier mache* table, so extremely delicate in its make, that if he had leaned upon it they would have gone over together, and spoiled the dignity of our interview. As for me, I remained standing, with one arm on the chimney-piece. I followed his slightest movement, and watched his face with hungry eyes. Never, in my life, or in my varied experience, have I seen a face so alter. I shall never forget it, were I to live a hundred years."

"He took his handkerchief from his pocket, and from time to time passed it across his face and mouth."

"He turned so pale that, at one moment, I thought he would have fainted; and his eyes were covered with a sort of film that almost made him look blind."

"Apart from this, not an exclamation, not a word, not a sigh."

"Once he made my heart heave with pity. I longed to advance, and snatch the fatal letters from his hands, to throw them into the fire, and, clasping him in my arms, to cry out, 'Brother, brother! let us forget the past—let us know and love each other!'"

CHAPTER XVI.

OLD CORKSCREW'S queer old face lighted up with pleasure at the words pronounced by the young barrister in our last chapter.

"There I recognize your heart, my boy—your generous, noble heart!"

"But I didn't express those words audibly, you know," went on Noel, "because I thought that the letters, once burned, ten to one he'd have had me turned out as an impostor."

"Of course—of course."

"At the end of about half an hour the Viscount handed me back the papers, and standing up so as to face me, leaned against the chimney-piece."

"You are right, sir," he said; "and if those letters were written by my father, everything tends to prove that I am not the son of the Countess de Valcourt. Have you any other proofs?"

"Germain, the valet, can certify."

"Germain died some years ago."

"Then I spoke to him of the nurse—the Widow Lerouge—and explained to him how easy it would be to find her, as she lived at the village of La Jonchere."

"What did he say to that?" asked Daddy Tabaret, in an eager tone.

"He was silent at first, seeming to reflect; then suddenly raised his hand to his forehead."

"Ah, I remember now!" he cried. "I visited her several times with my father, and on one occasion I recollect he gave her a cheque for a large amount of money."

"I observed that here was another proof in the claimant's favor. He made no reply, but commenced walking up and down the room. At last he stopped, and faced me."

"Do you happen to know the person who claims to be the legitimate son of Count Lionel de Valcourt?"

"I answered, 'I am the man.'"

"He lowered his head, and turned away."

"I thought so," he murmured; then advancing, he offered me his hand. 'I bear you no malice,' he said, huskily, 'but you have dealt me a fearful blow, and I hardly know what to say or what to think. My father will return in eight or ten days. I will ask you to accord me this delay, and immediately he arrives I will explain to him your case. I must beg you now to leave me. I feel dazed—ill, in fact; and as he spoke, he sunk back, as if faint, on the sofa, motioning for me to ring the bell for his servant.'

"I did so, and left him, feeling puzzled myself as to what my next move ought to be; but all my plans are scattered to the winds since the murder of my poor old nurse. Can you advise me?"

"Not now—not now," said the old man, who was meditating a retreat, and was fearful he might be led into saying something imprudent. "I'll sleep upon it, and see you again in the morning." Then he added, affectionately, "Poor boy—poor boy! what an anxious time you must have had of it!"

"Fearful! and joined to it all, worry about money matters."

"Money matters! I thought you were such an economical fellow."

"Before this dreadful revelation, which threatens to change my whole life, I had taken upon myself some engagements for a friend, a dear friend. Those engagements I must meet, and, under present circumstances, I cannot ask for assistance from the family purse."

"You're right—quite right; and I'm delighted you've mentioned it, for it just reminds me that it's in your power to do me a favor."

"Indeed!—and what's that?"

"Can you imagine, now, that I've got in my desk, poked away among my papers, no less a sum than a thousand pounds, in bank notes?"

"Rather imprudent," remarked the barrister.

"Of course it is; that's just what I meant; and what I'm about to propose is, that you can take care of them far better than I can."

Noel pressed the good old fellow's hand, and shook his head with an amused expression of face.

"Thank you all the same," he objected, "but I'm afraid I must refuse."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Daddy Tabaret, hotly; "I'm accustomed to have my way, and I'll bring the money to-morrow."

But remembering he had an appointment with the magistrate, M. Daburon, and perhaps might be detained all day, he added, immediately, "No; not to-morrow. I won't run any further risks; you shall have it this evening. This evening, did I say?—you shall have it at once!"

And before Noel could stop him, he had seized his hat and left the room.

In ten minutes he returned, with the roll of bank notes in his hand.

"If you don't find them enough," he said, as he thrust them into the pocket of the young barrister's coat, "there's plenty more at the same shop; orders punctually attended to, and the strictest secrecy observed."

And, without waiting for a reply, he was gone.

"What a queer old fellow he is," thought Noel; "he hasn't taken an I O U, or receipt of any kind." And he ran to the door as he spoke, in order to call him back; then stopped short, and listened. "He'll be coming again to-morrow," he reflected; "I'll let him have his own way now."

He opened his window, and listened to the footsteps of the old man until they died away in the lonely street; then he wound up his oil lamp, and, after that, arranged his hair, and put on an overcoat. Crossing to the door of Madame Gerdy's room, he listened attentively for any sound that might proceed from the sick-chamber.

All was silent, as if death already reigned there; upon which, he returned to his study, and, double-locking the door, descended the stairs on tip-toe, and, in a few minutes after, was in the courtyard at the back of the house.

Opening a small, green door, half hidden in ivy, with a key which he took from his pocket, he closed it softly behind him, and was soon lost to sight in the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHEN the young barrister emerges again, it is before a handsomely-carved door in the Rue de Provence, which opens to him the moment he pulls the bell-handle.

The porter in the lodge salutes him deferentially, yet with an affability that is not only respectful, but cordial.

This sort of "silvery" welcome will be well understood by those of our readers who have been in Paris, and know the arrangements of those huge houses, or hotels, of what was once the Queen City of the world.

Houses which can only be compared to a small London street stuck up on end, each floor being occupied by an entire family, with nothing to connect them one with the other but a general staircase—a staircase which is generally kept in exquisite order and cleanliness by the porter at the lodge. Sometimes a nobleman or a rich banker may occupy the ground-floor or luxurious first floor, while the topmost flight or sky parlor serves as a shivering refuge in winter, or an overheated oven in summer, for milliners, flower-makers, water-carriers, and others of those who live or starve by labor.

Dropping a silver piece into the hand of the obsequious porter, Noel ascends the polished oak staircase, and only pauses when he reaches the third floor.

Then, taking a small latch-key from his waistcoat-pocket, he inserts it in the lock of the door to the right, and enters.

But at the faint sound that the key makes in the lock, a maid-servant, coquettishly dressed in a light muslin dress, with mauve ribbons in her saucy little cap, rushes into the hall.

"Oh, it's you, sir!" she says, "clapping her hands. 'Missus has been expecting you for ever so long.'"

This exclamation bursts from her in such extremely loud tones that it must have been heard at the other end of the rooms, and might have served as a signal of warning to some one beyond; but the young barrister seems too preoccupied to remark the *ruse*, if indeed any *ruse* were meant.

"Is your mistress at home?" he said.

"Yes, sir; and in a nice temper, too. It was as much as I could do to prevent her calling on you at your mother's house. She's pinched me black and blue because I told her as it was against your orders."

"You did quite right," said Noel, looking frightened.

"Where is she?"

"In the smoking-room. I'm getting tea ready. Will you take some, sir?"

"Yes; place an extra cup for me. How confoundedly dark it is! give me your light;" and, taking it from her hands, he traversed successively several sumptuously furnished rooms, until he reached the one indicated by the maid-servant.

It is an apartment of an oval shape, with a remarkably high ceiling, formed like a dome, painted in sky-blue, and dotted with stars.

An ordinary mortal would have thought himself three thousand leagues from Paris or London, and in the house of some opulent inhabitant of the Celestial Empire.

The fantastic furniture, with its extraordinary and incoherent ornaments; the delicious, yet brilliantly-colored tissues, that hung from the walls; the beautiful rose-colored lamps, that bloomed rather than shed a light, transported one at once to Hong Kong or Shanghai.

A divan, or sofa, very large, and very low, furnished with piles of cushions, covered with the same tissues that hung from the walls, was placed at the further end

of this smoking-room, upon which, smothered up in cashmere shawls, a young woman was lying, smoking a cigarette.

She was a tiny little creature, but her throat, shoulders and arms were exquisitely round and faultless in shape; whilst her dimpled, yet slender hands, with their rose-tinted nails, looked like costly jewels, only made to be caressed.

She was not beautiful—hardly even what could have been called very pretty; but she had one of those faces which, once seen, are never to be forgotten.

Her forehead was rather too high, and her mouth, notwithstanding its charming freshness of color, too large. Her eyebrows were perfectly arched, but they were so palpably artificial in their inky blackness, and extreme decision of line, that they gave a certain hardness to the whole face; but, to compensate for this defect, her complexion was beautiful and clear, and of a pale olive color, that had an inexpressibly cool and soft appearance. Her dark, velvety eyes had a magnetic power in them very rarely seen. Her teeth were very white and even; and her black hair was long and fine, with blue gleams in its rich, wavy masses.

On perceiving Noel, who raised the silk curtains that hung before the door as he entered, she half raised herself, and leaned upon her elbow.

"So, you've come at last!" she said, speaking in a sharp voice; "and it is high time, too!"

The barrister paused for a moment, almost suffocated by the tropical heat of the smoking-room.

"What a stifling atmosphere!" he said. "It's like an oven!"

"Do you think so?" remarked the young lady. "I'm sorry we differ in opinion. I think it awfully chilly; but that's because I'm ill. I hate lying down; it irritates me, and always brings on a nervous headache. Waiting for you has made it worse. I expected you yesterday."

"It was impossible for me to come—utterly impossible."

"You knew very well, however, that two of my bills were due to-day, and that I had several heavy payments to make."

Noel bent his head, and looked as awkward as a schoolboy whose master is rating him on Monday morning for having neglected his lessons on Sunday evening.

"Oh, come!" he expostulated; "you really ought to forgive me. I'm only one day behind time."

"And that's nothing, is it?" replied the fair occupant of the sofa. "A gentleman—a *real* gentleman I mean—doesn't care a fig about his own bills, and all that; but he cares about those of the girl he loves, and intends one day to make his wife. Recollect that I've a position to make, and if I can't pay my way, where am I?"

"My dear Pussy," pleaded the barrister, "only listen!"

"Don't call me Pussy. I don't want any pet names now. My name is Nicholson—Nellie Nicholson; and you'll oblige me by putting 'Miss' before it when you address me."

"Well, then," said the young man, half amused, half vexed, "to prove to you, my dear Miss Nicholson, that I never forget you when absent, will you accept this bracelet, which you admired so much in the Palais Royal last week?"

Miss Nicholson, without raising herself, extended her lovely arm and hand to receive the casket, opened it with the most indifferent air imaginable, looked at its contents, yawned, and said, "Ah!"

"Is it the right one?" said Noel, anxiously.

"Oh, yes; it is the same. Only it looked twenty times prettier in the shop-window than it does now."

"I'm in ill-luck this evening," said the barrister, discouraged. "Nothing I say or do seems to please you."

"And why, pray?"

"In the first place, it's very plain that you don't like the bracelet."

"But indeed I do; it's a perfect love of a thing, and just makes up the dozen."

It was now Noel's turn to say "Ah!"

As she made no reply, but simply gazed in a dreamy sort of way before her, as though she were looking into the dim distance, he added, "Well, I must say you've a queer sort of manner in expressing your satisfaction!"

"Ah! that's just like you men!" cried the lady. "Never satisfied unless you see us all ablaze with love and gratitude! You bring me a present—pretty and simple enough in its way—and you expect me to pay you back in ready money."

"Oh, Pussy!" said the barrister, much hurt.

"Yes, in ready money. I don't mean in pounds, shillings and pence—of course not. I'm not so mean as that—but I mean in the ready money of thanks. According to your views on the subject, I ought to fill the whole house with cries of thanks and joy, whilst I clasp your knees and call you 'my benefactor, my only friend!'"

Cool as he was on ordinary occasions, it was very evident that Noel was extremely irritated now, and his irritation seemed to delight the charming Nellie beyond all expression.

"Are not my simple thanks sufficient?" she went on.

"Shall I call in Jeannette to admire this wonderful bracelet?"

Noel made no reply. He kept his eyes persistently fixed on the ground.

But Nellie was determined to tease and torture him.

"Oh, I forgot! Jeannette's nobody—only my maid! One of us, you know. Her thanks would go for nothing. Perhaps you'd prefer my sending down for the porter?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders, like a philosopher who thinks it beneath him to notice the playfulness of a kitten, or the wanton gambols of a King Charles' spaniel in its puphood.

"Why do you worry your little head," he said, appealingly, "in trying to irritate me? It hasn't the slightest effect, I assure you. If you have any serious grudge against me, tell it me simply, and in as few words as possible; and if I can remedy or remove any painful expression from your mind, I will do so at once."

"Let's be serious, then," said Nellie. "I want a plain answer to a plain question. Why didn't you bring me the three hundred pounds for which I was so pressed?"

"Because I had important business, and couldn't come."

"And you couldn't have sent them?" she asked.

"If I did not send or bring them, it was because I hadn't them. In fact—in fact!"

The young girl looked at him for a moment incredulously, then burst into a merry peal of laughter.

"Why, you're trying to act the 'Romance of a Poor Young Man!'"

"Act? my poor little Pussy! I'm not acting—I'm telling you the real truth! I'm ruined, Pussy! I'm on my last legs! I haven't a farthing in the world I can call my own!"

"Oh, Noel, can I believe you?" she said. "Oh, if I could but believe you were telling me the truth!"

Her lover received this sudden gleam of joy like a dagger thrust; and placed his hand upon his heart, as if in pain.

"She believes in what I have said," he thought; "and rejoices in my ruin! She wants an excuse to break off our long engagement, and to be free to marry another!"

He was utterly mistaken.

The very idea that a man had ruined himself solely for her, without letting a word of reproach escape him, transported this girl with a joy beyond our power to describe. She almost felt inclined to love the half-broken-hearted, penniless man, whom she had despised when he was prosperous, rich, and proud.

But, suddenly, she fell back on the sofa, with another and more sudden fit of laughing.

"What a sentimental little creature I am!" she said. "As if you men could think of anything else but yourselves! If I spent a florin more than you intended me to spend, you'd take up your heart and your hat, and say good-bye to me forever!"

"That's very true!" remarked the barrister, coldly. "As you never keep an account about anything, I am forced to do so; and I find it useful in proving to me how my income is frittered away without the slightest profit or gratification to myself."

The maid coming in with tea, put a stop for the time to this tender duet between the lovers—a duet which had already been rehearsed on several occasions by poor Noel. And we seize this opportunity to introduce our readers more fully to the lady who has taken the principal part in the foregoing scene.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MISS NELLIE NICHOLSON was a Frenchwoman, but her father had been an English jockey, well-known upon the courses of Ascot and Epsom.

Brought over by his master to Paris, he took, after riding his first race at Longchamps, a very enviable position upon that slippery and frowsy foothold, the French turf.

For the first year "Bandy Nicholson," as he was familiarly called by his friends, took high honors—so high that, despite the peculiar character of his legs, he walked into the affections of a certain lady's-maid, in whom the young lord, his employer, took a great interest. They were married.

A few months afterwards, Bandy took to drink; and a few months after taking to drink, he took to his bed. One month after taking to his bed he took to his coffin, and was duly taken to a parish cemetery, which his master, mindful of his past services, had graciously procured for him.

And Nellie?

Poor child! Three months after the death of her father, her mother also disappeared with a Brazilian gentleman, who owned much cattle and cash in Rio Janeiro.

Unfortunate little Nellie! An English rose thrown into the mire of the Paris streets, to be admired for the moment, and to be trampled under foot when its brief admiration was over.

But Nellie Nicholson had talent.

A talent quickly seen by the quick eyes of a Parisian manager, Oscar Rigaud, proprietor of the Beaumarchais Theater.

This enterprising gentleman quickly offered the pretty girl an engagement, which—for it was a question of bread or no bread—was as quickly accepted. It was a hard life, and the girl's heart hardened with it.

She had been five years upon the boards of this low Paris theater when, during a chance visit, her peculiar and striking beauty attracted the notice of the young barrister.

Through the friend who had taken him "behind the scenes" he made her acquaintance, and a few weeks afterwards made a proposal of marriage.

This proposal, after a secret inquiry into his ways and means, was firmly rejected by the fair lady. That is to say, that whilst holding him to his bond, she awaited the time until he acquired that position which he asserted he was *sure* to attain.

In the meantime, playing with the madness of his love, she permitted him to ruin himself in her behalf.

A beautiful serpent—the tightness of whose coils were scarcely felt by the fascinated victim, because the pressure was so soft and gradual.

Can any excuse be found for Nellie Nicholson?

Christian charity will surely find one—namely, the root of her evil education, struck deeply down into the Paris mud; and what, with other and better culture, might and *would* have produced a better result, blossomed into a Dead Sea apple—all brightness and beauty without; all dust and ashes within.

But to return to the conversation interrupted by the entrance of the maid-servant.

Her presence gave the young barrister time to recover himself.

He looked at the pretty little creature on the sofa for whom he had sacrificed so much, and his anger faded away like a summer storm.

The moment the maid had left the room, he drew his chair closer to her, and took one of her tiny hands in his.

"Come—come!" he said, tenderly; "why have you been so hard upon me this evening? If I've been in the wrong, you've punished me sufficiently. Let's shake hands, and be friends."

But she pushed his hand away, saying, in a hard, dry tone, that she was too ill and too worried "to talk nonsense!"

"Ill!" said Noel, anxiously. "Shall I send for the doctor?"

"What for? There's nothing the matter with me but botheration. My life is nothing but a prolonged yawn. You don't like me to be seen with you anywhere, and so you won't take me anywhere. A nice sort of a husband you'll make! I like life, laughter, gaiety; while you are as grave as an undertaker, with a black scarf hanging down to his heels, and a board with black feathers on his head."

"You are not very complimentary, Nellie. If you only knew how much I suffer!"

"Go on! That's just like you men—nobody seems to suffer but yourselves. Why am I not to be seen about with you? Surely, you're not ashamed of the person you have asked to be your wife?"

"I tell you there are family reasons!"

"Oh, hang your family reasons! If you loved me half as much as you say you do, you'd think no more of your fine family than I do of the puff of a cigarette."

"It is a question of money."

"Well, there certainly is something in that," pouted the little beauty. "Nobody can get on without money, and a lot of it, too; at any rate, I can't."

"I'm afraid that's very true, Nellie," said the barrister, with a sigh.

"And talking of money reminds me that I've my dressmaker's bill to pay, and you promised!"

Before she could conclude the sentence, Noel had placed on the table a portion of the bank-notes given him by old Corkscrew; the very rustling of which banished every vestige of a frown from Nellie's lovely face, and her pouting lips brightened immediately into the sunniest of smiles.

"You are the best of dears," she said, "and I'm wrong to tease you. My bills will come to three hundred pounds, if all are settled."

"And I have only brought you four hundred. You must be satisfied with that. I am about to leave Paris for a few days."

"Leave Paris!"

"For a few days only, and the result of that short, compulsory absence may be—nay, will be, our happiness for life."

"Is it a secret? Oh, do tell me what it is?" she cried, eagerly.

"I can't."

"Do!" said the girl, clasping her hands, and looking at him in the most coaxing manner imaginable.

"I cannot; in fact, I dare not; but, by-and-by you shall know all. In the meantime, listen to me attentively. Whatever may happen, and under no pretext of any sort, must you attempt to see me at my house, as you have already tried to do. Don't even write. If you disobey me in this you may do me an irreparable injury; if you are ill, or any thing unforeseen occurs, send round that old thief—what's his name?"

"Ducroc, the money-lender?"

"Yes. I must see him to-morrow; he's got some bills of mine. And now good-night, Pussy."

"Good-night; and mind this must be the last of your awful secrets; for I tell you very plainly, I don't intend to put up with them."

"This will be the last, I swear it, Pussy—the very, very last!"

"Noel, old boy" recommenced the young lady, this time very seriously, as she followed him to the door, "I don't feel comfortable about you. You're hiding something from me. I know it—nay, I'm sure of it. For the last few days there has been something strange about you—something I can't describe—something 'queerish'—something I don't like."

He made no answer, but kissing her hand, pushed her gently back, closed the door behind him, and a few moments after was in the street.

* * * * *

"Did you ever know such an annoying creature in all your life?" said the mistress to her maid, who had rushed in "to hear the news" the moment the door had closed upon Noel.

"Well, I must say as I never did," answered the accommodating Jeannette. "If my young man was to go on as he does, I'd—I'd!"

"Well, what would you do?"

"Well, as he's only the baker, I'd leave him off for the butcher."

"Ah, but, you see, I can't do that," said Nellie, grandly. "I'm going to be a lady by-and-by."

"Lor'! I said Jeannette, opening her eyes.

"Yes, a lady; and a girl in your position of life can't understand what my feelings are."

The maid vouchsafed no reply. Perhaps she thought it more prudent to hold her tongue.

"All I know is," said her mistress, "that things can't go on as they do; and if I weren't so afraid of him, I'd run away; but he's so awful fond of me that he's capable of killing me."

The maid-servant endeavored, but in vain, to defend

Noel. Her young mistress never heard a word she said.

"Why is he always away?" she murmured. "What new scheme is afoot? Eight days' absence looks queer. Is he going to be married? Ah, if I only knew that, I'd soon put a stop to his little game."

And in this frame of mind, she dismissed her maid, and went to bed.

CHAPTER XIX.

WALKING rapidly homewards, the young barrister entered by the private door known only to himself, and was soon installed in his study before his absence could have excited notice.

But five minutes had hardly elapsed before there came an anxious rapping at his door.

"Sir—sir, oh, do speak to me!"

He opened the door impatiently.

"Well, what's the matter? I thought this was my study, and it was understood I wasn't to be disturbed."

"Oh, sir," gasped the servant, wiping her eyes with her apron, "don't be angry with me; but missus is so awful bad! I've rapped at your door three times. You must have been asleep. Oh, sir, do come! I'm afraid she's dying."

The barrister followed the frightened woman into Madame Gerdy's room.

He could hardly restrain an exclamation of fear as he looked at her, she was so terribly changed.

Her face was livid in its ashen pallor, and her eyes, which gleamed with a dull, lurid light, seemed filled with a fine sort of red powder, or dust.

Her long hair, that had escaped from the net she wore, fell like a dark veil down her face and neck, contributing, if possible, to the wildness of her appearance.

From time to time a groan or sob escaped her lips, mingled with a few unintelligible words.

Sometimes a spasm, more terrible than those that had preceded it, wrung from her a cry of pain.

She did not recognize Noel as he entered—in fact, was unconscious of the presence of any one in the room.

"Isn't she awful bad?" whispered the poor servant; "and wasn't I right to ask you to come and judge for yourself?"

"Yes. But who would have thought that this fever would have made such progress? Put on your bonnet, and run for your life to Doctor Harvey, and tell him to come at once."

Doctor Harvey was the young barrister's most intimate friend, and Noel knew that the summons would be obeyed at once.

And he was right, for ten minutes had hardly elapsed before the doctor was in the room. In less time than it takes to write, he had taken the lamp from the table, and, after examining the sick woman, came back to his friend.

"What's happened to her?" he said, abruptly.

"Some great shock, eh? Now, mind, I must know the truth, or I can do nothing."

"The truth?" stammered the barrister.

"Yes; the truth, and nothing but the truth. This is a peculiar case—not at all an ordinary one. She's suffering from encephalitis."

"Encephalitis? what's that?"

"Inflammation of the brain."

"And the cause?"

The doctor looked grave, and shrugged his shoulders.

"The usual cause is the shock of some great sorrow; a shock, at any rate, that suddenly strikes the nervous system. Tell me, Noel, tell me, as your old friend, has Madame Gerdy suffered such a shock?"

The barrister paused for some moments before he replied, then, pressing his friend's hand, he said, "Harvey, such a blow as that you hint at has, indeed, fallen upon this unhappy woman."

"Unhappy woman! Noel—Noel! Is it thus you speak of your mother?"

The barrister raised his hands with a gesture of sorrowful entreaty, and his head sank on his breast.

"Madame Gerdy is not my mother."

"Are you mad?"

"Alas! no; though the wrong I have suffered might have made me so. Madame Gerdy has robbed me—falsely robbed me of my inheritance to enrich her own son—robbed me alike of fortune and of name! It is now three weeks since I discovered the double fraud; and the effect of that discovery you see."

Another pause; and then Noel asked, in a low voice, and without meeting the eyes of his friend, "Is the malady dangerous?"

"So dangerous," was the solemn reply, "that unless the attack be stayed within twenty-four hours, your mother—I would say, Madame Gerdy—is a corpse!"

CHAPTER XX.

ELEVEN o'clock was striking from a neighboring church steeple, when Old Corkscrew left his young friend's house.

"What a mine I've sprung!" he thought, as he walked joyously along the pavement, in a seventh heaven of delight. "I've bowled out my professional friends—I've forestalled them all! Ha! ha! To think that I, who am only an amateur, should have smashed my clever colleagues in the detective police force! Gevrol was right when he said that 'Chance was the best detective of them all.' I wasn't far out, though, about there being a child mixed up in the business; but I never suspected a substitution. Bless my heart! I thought that sort of thing given over in my grandmother's time, and only used by melo-dramatic authors at our lowest theaters. However, as I learnt in my grammar, 'a word to the wise is sufficient for them,' and it proves the danger of preconceived ideas in the police. They're frightened at improbabilities, whilst lo and behold! it is improbabilities that are true? Poor humanity!—I

thought I should have split with laughing when I heard Noel talking of his aristocratic relations. Ha! ha! and to think of his mother—a woman I would have canonized as a saint—that she could have lent herself to such a scheme! I was going to propose marriage to her, too. Well, well; I suppose I'm an old fool, after all."

At this last thought Old Corkscrew shuddered. He saw himself married and settled; then discovering, all at once, the past history of his wife.

He saw himself mixed up in a scandalous law-suit, with the scorn and ridicule of society falling like an avalanche on his head.

He leant against a lamp-post, almost overwhelmed the vision he had conjured up.

By this time the Daddy had arrived at the house of the examining magistrate, Monsieur Daburon, who was just upon going to bed; having left, however, orders with his servant to admit the old man, no matter at what hour he called.

At the sight of his self-constituted detective, the magistrate hastily put on his dressing-gown and advanced to meet him.

"Something has happened," he said eagerly, "or you wouldn't be here at this hour! Are you on the trail? Have you got a clew?"

"Better than that!" said Old Corkscrew, smiling, and looking at the anxious face before him with an aggravating calmness.

"Out with it then; and don't stand grinning there like an old baboon!"

Daddy Tabaret struck the clenched fist of his right hand into the palm of his left.

"I've got my man! I've found out the murderer of the Widow Lerouge!"

"What, already! It seems impossible!"

"I've the honor of repeating to you, sir," continued Daddy, "that I have discovered the man who committed the crime at La Jonchère."

Then, with a precision and clearness to which the magistrate had hardly believed him capable, he told the story he had gleaned from the young lawyer that evening.

"And those letters I've told you about, I've seen. In fact, I don't mind telling you, I've bagged one of 'em—only to verify the handwriting, mind you—only to verify the handwriting!"

And as he spoke, he placed the letter on M. Daburon's knee.

"Yes," murmured the magistrate; "I think we've got our man at last! The evidence against him seems as clear as the day. Crime breeds crime, and the guilt of the father has made an assassin of the son!"

"I've hidden the names as yet, sir," continued Daddy Tabaret, "because I wanted to hear your opinion first."

"Oh, you can mention them to me without the least danger," interrupted the magistrate. "In whatever position in life the parties happen to be—however high they may be placed—I have never hesitated in the course I have to pursue."

"I know that, sir—I know that! But in the present instance they happen to be very highly placed indeed. The father, who has sacrificed his legitimate son for his illegitimate, is the Count Lionel de Valcourt, and the murderer of the Widow Lerouge is the Viscount Albert de Valcourt."

Old Corkscrew, accustomed, in theatrical language, to stage effects, had dealt out these last words with exasperating slowness—calculating that they would produce an immense impression. The effect surpassed his wildest expectation.

Mr. Daburon seemed struck as with a thunderbolt.

He shuddered at first, then stood still, a statue of astonishment and horror.

Mechanically he repeated from time to time, as soon as his white lips could frame the words, "Albert de Valcourt?—Albert de Valcourt?"

"Yes," reiterated the Daddy; "the noble Viscount—it's him, and no mistake; and I must say it's a pill as I find somewhat hard to swallow, considering as he has gone through life as yet without a word that can be said against him."

Becoming suddenly aware of the extraordinary change in the face of the magistrate, he approached him in alarm.

"You are ill!—your face is so white! What's the matter?"

"Nothing—nothing. I'm quite well," answered M. Daburon. "It was only the surprise—the shock. I happen to know the man you mention; and—and—well, the truth is, I should like to be alone for a short time, just to have a good think, as an Irishman would say, 'all alone by myself.' Go into the next room; there's a good fire there, and lots of books, police reports, and all that sort of literature—just the thing to amuse you;" and, so saying, he pushed his old friend out of the room; and, directly he was gone, sunk into a chair, and, covering his face with his hands, gave way to an uncontrollable fit of sobbing.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE name of De Valcourt, mentioned unexpectedly to Monsieur Daburon by old Corkscrew, awakened the most painful memories in his heart. To borrow a simile from a great Roman poet, it was like walking over lava, beneath which the ashes were still burning; for the young magistrate had loved, but loved in vain, a young and beautiful girl, of noble family, and it was this very Viscount Albert de Valcourt who had been his rival.

He remembered the evening when he had proposed to her, and "all the things that had been."

And, whilst he sits dreaming, we will seize the opportunity of describing our heroine.

Clare d'Arange had just completed her seventeenth year when Monsieur Daburon first saw her.

A tall, graceful, gentle girl, with a soft, innocent expression of countenance; fair, silky hair, banded back

a la Grecque from a broad, low brow, contrasting exquisitely with deep blue eyes, fringed by dark lashes.

She was still very slight in figure, and walked with a certain swaying motion, impossible to describe in itself, but very charming, reminding the beholder of long reeds in the river, or the waving corn in the summer fields. She was an orphan, and had been adopted by an eccentric old grandmother, who alternately scolded and spoiled her.

But to return to Monsieur Daburon, and the evening that he remembered so bitterly and so well.

It was in the month of August. The heat at mid-day had been overwhelming. Towards the night a breeze had sprung up, and the trees in the garden made a pleasant rustling; but there was a sort of shuddering in the air that foretold a storm.

They were both seated at the bottom of the garden in an arbor filled with exotic plants; and between the broad leaves and branches they could discern, from time to time, the muslin dress of Clare's grandmother, who was taking a "constitutional" after her dinner.

They had been sitting there a long time without speaking, touched with the beauty of the quiet night, their senses oppressed with the faint odors of the flowers that clustered round the fountain, when Monsieur Daburon suddenly took the young girl's hand in his. It was the first time he had ever done so, and the touch of the soft, white skin sent the blood rushing to his head.

"Mademoiselle d'Arange!" he whispered; "Clare!" She started, and looked at him with her beautiful eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Pardon me," he continued; "oh, pardon me! I asked your grandmother before I had courage to ask you. One word from your lips will decide my future happiness or misery. Dear Clare don't repulse me—I love you!"

Whilst he spoke, Mademoiselle d'Arange looked at him as if she doubted her senses. But at the words, "I love you!" uttered with a concentrated passion, she withdrew her hand with a stifled cry.

"You—you? But that can't be possible!"

Had his life depended on it, M. Daburon could not have uttered a word.

The presentiment of a great misfortune tightened the valves of his heart as though they were pressed in a vice.

Clara burst into tears, and hid her face in her hands, "Oh, what an unhappy girl I am!" she moaned—"what an unhappy girl!"

"Unhappy!" cried the young magistrate; "and I the cause! Clare this is unkind, for I'd rather die than bring sorrow to one I love so dearly. What have I done? Tell me; don't turn your head away. You'll break my heart if you keep me longer in suspense!"

He sunk on his knees in the dust and gravel of the arbor, and tried to clasp her hands in his; but she pushed back with a gentleness that was almost tender.

"Let me cry for a little while," she whispered. "It will do me good. Women are such foolish things, crying gives them relief! You'll hate me, perhaps, for what I am going to say—despise me, perhaps; but I declare to you most solemnly that I never for one moment suspected even that I had inspired you with the feelings you have just expressed."

Monsieur Daburon remained on his knees, with his head bent on his breast, like a criminal expecting the final blow.

"Yes," continued Clara, speaking in a tone of bitter self-reproach, "what a detestable and heartless coquette you must think me! I understand it all now. How could a man like you, unless possessed by a deep love have behaved to me as you have done, so delicate so kind, so tender, and so true? I was so selfish I thought only of myself, and how pleasant it was to have such a sincere friend; because, you see, I have never thought of you in any other light but as that of the best and dearest of fathers."

This last word revealed to the unfortunate magistrate the whole extent of the delusion under which he had been laboring.

He rose slowly to his feet, with a look of pained surprise.

"Your father?"

"Yes," she repeated. "I loved you as a father—as a brother; in fact, you represented to me all the family I have lost—father, mother, brothers and sisters."

Monsieur Daburon could hardly repress a sob. He felt as though his heart was breaking.

"Ah, why," continued Clara, with a growing excitement, "was the confidence I had in you not a greater one still? I then might have spared you this scene, which is so painful to us both—I then would have told you that my heart is no longer in my own keeping, and that I have given my sole happiness on this earth to another."

To be soaring up to the skies, and to be suddenly dashed to the earth.

Poor Monsieur Daburon, we shall not attempt to describe his feelings!

"You love another!" he said, after a long silence; "and your grandmother is unaware of it. He cannot be a man worthy of your love, Clare, or why isn't he invited here?"

"There are obstacles!" murmured the young girl, her eyes filling with tears—"insurmountable obstacles! His family is rich—immensely rich; and, as you know, I am poor. His father is a very hard man, and won't hear of the match."

"His father!" cried the magistrate, with a scorn he did not care to hide. "His father!—his family. And he thought of *them* in comparison to you; yet he hesitates, knowing that you love him! Ah, would I were in his place, with the whole world against me! What sacrifice can a man make for the woman he loves? Even the greatest is a joy to him! To suffer—to strive—even to wait almost despairing, yet to hope with a constant devotion—that's what I call love!"

"And that's just how I love!" said Mademoiselle d'Arange, simply.

This answer crushed the magistrate. He felt that his last chance was gone. Yet he experienced a sort of voluptuous agony in further torturing himself—by proving, as it were his misery, by the intensity of his suffering.

"But, pardon me," he persisted; "how did you make his acquaintance—have opportunities of speaking with him, without the knowledge of your grandmother?"

"I will hide nothing from you," she said, in a quiet voice, and with all the dignity that belongs to purity, "because I think that you have a right to question me. I have known him for a long time. I first met him at my cousin's house, the Countess de Beaumont's, and I have since frequently met him at various balls and parties."

"He must belong to a very illustrious race," remarked the magistrate with a sneer, "to hesitate at an alliance with such an old county family as yours!"

"You need not question me; I will tell you all you wish to know, without any cross-examination," she answered, with a faint smile. "I will even tell you his name—Count Albert de Valcourt."

The grandmother, having by this time taken her "constitutional," approached the arbor.

"Won't you come in, Monsieur Daburon?" she cried, in her sharp voice, that seemed to pierce the ear like some potent acid. "Won't you come in? The chess-board is prepared, and I've a move to make that will puzzle even your logical head."

Startled, the magistrate rose, and answered, stammering, "I'm at your service in a moment."

Clara held him back by the arm.

"I've not asked you to keep my secret," she said.

He seized her hands with a pained expression of face at the doubt her words implied.

"I know I can trust you," she said; "but I know, also, that from this day forward my peace of mind, and my happiness at home, is at an end!"

Monsieur Daburon looked at her in surprise.

"It's very plain," she continued, "that what I—a young girl without any experience of the world—failed to see, my grandmother saw at a glance! In continuing to encourage your visits, she tacitly consented to your proposals for my hand."

Briefly he told her that such had been the case; delicately avoiding the pecuniary part of the case, which had so strongly influenced the old lady.

"I knew it! I guessed it all!" sighed Clara. "What will she say when she knows I have refused you?"

"You must know very little of my character," interrupted the magistrate. "I will say nothing to her. I will only go away, and—and—not see you again; that will explain everything! Perhaps she will think that—that—I've changed my mind." He bent his face upon his hands, and moaned. "Oh, Clara! the burden you've laid on me is harder than I can bear!"

"How kind—how generous you are!" sobbed the girl, moved by his simple grief.

"Yes, I'll go away!" proceeded the unhappy lover; "and before the week is out, you will have forgotten the man whose life you have blighted!"

He spoke so huskily, and in such trembling tones, that his voice was hardly distinct.

"But, whatever happens," he continued, "remember that in this world there exists a man who would lay down his life for you! If ever you want a friend, whose self-devotion is beyond a doubt, come to me! Good-bye!—good-bye!"

His eyes were full of tears.

Instinctively she raised her face to his. He touched her forehead with his cold lips, and, before she could speak, was gone.

Such were the events that recalled the name of De Valcourt so bitterly to the magistrate's memory. He thought them buried in the sands of time; and here they were, laid bare again, like words written with sympathetic ink, that start to life the moment the paper is placed near the fire.

For some minutes, thanks to the peculiarity of his position, he assisted, as it were, at a representation of his own life, both as actor and spectator.

His first thought, it must be owned, was one of hate, followed by a detestable feeling of satisfaction.

Chance had placed the man whom Clara had chosen above himself, in his power. No longer the haughty aristocrat, illustrious by his fortune and long descent, but a nobody—the son of a woman of light reputation, who, to keep his stolen position, had committed a cowardly murder.

Here was a revenge, sweet and deep, which he could cover under the *shield of the law*, and strike his enemy with the sword of justice.

But it was only a flash of lightning. The conscience of the honest man revolted and once more asserted its all-powerful voice.

A revulsion of feeling followed and a project of mad generosity usurped his former feelings.

"Suppose I save him; and, for Clare's sake, leave him at least life and honor? But how—how can it be managed? In order to succeed, I should have to suppress the discoveries of Old Corkscrew, and impose upon him the complicity of silence; and, after that, follow up a false track at the heels of that donkey, Gevrol, who is now pursuing a phantom murderer. No; it can't be done—it can't be done!"

And again the magistrate bent his head upon his hands. The clock on his chimney-piece striking three, aroused him from his reverie.

"I've forgotten Daddy Tabaret, poor old fellow; he must be sleeping like a top by this time. I'll go and rouse him up. By feeling his pulse, I may find a way of getting clear of all my scruples."

M. Daburon was mistaken. His visitor was not asleep, but jumped up on his entrance, with the startling vivacity of a Jack-in-the-box.

"Well," he cried, "I suppose you've been making

out a warrant for the arrest of Viscount Albert de Valcourt?"

The magistrate started, like a wounded man might start who sees the surgeon place his instrument-case by the bedside. The time for action had arrived.

"Gently—gently, my young old friend; don't let us do things in a hurry!"

"But he's guilty—guilty, my dear sir! If he hasn't committed the crime, who has? Who but he could have had the slightest interest in the Widow Lerouge? In her evidence—her papers—her letters?"

"Yes; but—"

Daddy Tabaret stared at the magistrate in mute surprise; but the latter seemed lost in reflection. Suddenly he roused himself, as with an effort, and asked abruptly, "What would you do if you were in my place?"

"Do," cried the old man. "Can you ask me such a question? Why I'd be down upon them like a thousand of bricks!—like a thunder-bolt! and bring him here before he had time to say Jack Robinson! I wouldn't waste time in asking him captious questions; but I'd crush him at once with my certainty of his guilt. I wouldn't allow him to open his mouth until I had finished, and this is how I'd begin."

And then the keen old lynx told the magistrate how he would proceed in his examination of the prisoner; and so far convinced his listener, that he gave way to his reasoning, and promised that on the morrow a warrant would be issued for the arrest of the Viscount Albert de Valcourt.

CHAPTER XXII.

On the same day as the discovery of the crime at the village of La Jonchere; nay, at the very hour when Old Corkscrew was proving his case so clearly in the cottage of the murdered woman, Viscount Albert de Valcourt entered his carriage, to meet his father at the railway-station.

The Viscount was very pale; every feature drawn as by sleepless days and anxious nights.

All the servants had remarked the change in the "young master."

"He ain't hisself," said the cook. "He's off his feed; and when a man's off his feed, you may be sure there's something up."

The housemaid suggested it was love. The valet said it was billiards.

The domestic spies were still lost in conjecture, when the carriage containing the master and the son rattled into the courtyard.

The Count descended the first, and leaning on the arm of his son, ascended the flight of steps. In the immense vestibule, the men-servants stood like a hedge-row of corn-flowers and poppies.

Their master cast at them a scrutinizing glance, just as an officer might on his soldiers before parade. He seemed satisfied with their appearance, and passed on to his apartments to change his dress for dinner.

The first half-hour of the dinner passed in solemn silence.

The Count was a great feeder, on principle. He was fond of his enormous appetite, which, to a poor man, would have been an absolute calamity. He was fond of reminding his friends of the great men who were famous for their digestive powers. Charles the Fifth eat mountains of meat. Louis the Fourteenth absorbed at each repast what would have satisfied six ordinary men; and he maintained that men might almost be judged according to their digestive capacities, comparing them to lamps, whose brilliant light was only owing to the amount of oil they consumed.

On the present occasion he eyed his son askance, pretending not to perceive that he was simply playing with his knife and fork, and had hardly tasted a morsel upon his plate.

At last he broke the silence by broaching a disagreeable subject. He always adopted these tactics when he wished to goad Albert into speaking.

"Well, I hope you've thought better about that love-affair of yours, and have given up all thoughts of marrying a girl who's as poor as a church mouse?"

"Are you speaking of Clare?" asked Albert.

"Of course I am! There ought to be no deception between us. You know I have set my face against your marrying a woman without money. A man of your birth should think only of his name, and how further to exalt it."

The conversation upon this subject might have become interminable had not Albert, in despite of a visible restraint, kept himself "outside the ring" of the discussion, answering some direct question from time to time in simple monosyllables. At last the old Count lost his temper.

"By the blood of my ancestors," he cried at last, bringing down his hand upon the table till the glasses rung again, "I sometimes think you're not worthy to belong to so great a family as the De Valcourts!"

There are certain conditions of the mind when the least conversation becomes extremely painful. For the last hour Albert had been suffering an intolerable agony. The patience with which he had armed himself deserted him at last.

"And if I do not belong to your illustrious race, sir, perhaps no one can give better reasons for my misfortune than you can."

The look with which the young Viscount accentuated this sentence was so full of meaning that his father started back in his chair.

"I don't understand you."

Albert would have given anything to recall the words; but it was too late.

"Sir," he continued, with evident embarrassment, "I have to speak to you upon matters of the most serious kind—matters so serious, that my tongue hesitates

how to utter them. Your honor, mine, and the honor of the family, are alike implicated."

"Facts, sir, facts!" interrupted the Count, harshly. "I want none of your set speeches."

There was a pause of some moments; then Albert spoke this time with a strange decision.

"In your absence, sir, I have been made acquainted with some of the circumstances of your past life. I have read the whole of your correspondence with Madame Valerie de Gerdy—"

The Count didn't leave Albert the time to finish his sentence. He sprang to his feet as though stung by a serpent, overturning his chair as he did so.

"Not another word!" he cried, in a menacing voice—"not another word, on your peril!"

But ashamed seemingly of his sudden passion, he recovered himself almost immediately, and lifting up his chair with an affectation of extreme calm, replaced it at the table.

There was a long pause.

The father avoided his son's eyes, and spoke, this time in a firm, though low voice. "Now, Albert, explain. Tell me by what means you have had knowledge of this correspondence."

"Sir, I have no intention to hide anything from you. As far as I know it, you shall know all. On Sunday morning last a young man presented himself here, declaring he was charged with a message for me of the highest importance, which, nevertheless, could be delivered only to me. This man revealed to me the secret of my birth."

"And you didn't have the rascal thrust out of our doors?" exclaimed the Count.

"No, sir. I might have done so had he not, with a calmness that contrasted strangely with my passion, desired—nay, demanded that I should peruse a packet of letters which he placed upon the table before me. Taking them in my hand—"

"You threw them in the fire, of course?" interrupted the Count, leaning anxiously forward. "You had a fire in your room, I know. You can't mean to tell me you had such documents in your hands for a moment only, and that they still exist?"

"No, sir; I entertained no such thought. They were placed in my hands in confidence. Besides, I recognized your handwriting. I took the letters—"

"And you read them?"

"Every one!"

The old Count turned deadly pale, and, reaching his hand to a decanter of brandy that stood on the table, poured out a glass! but before he could raise it to his lips, the door was opened abruptly, and a servant, with a frightened face, appeared upon the threshold, whilst others of his fellows were seen further down the corridor, their gestures denoting surprise and alarm.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE pale face of the old Count de Valcourt flushed crimson, as he stood facing his servants, with all the arrogance that belonged to the traditions of his ancient race.

"What's the meaning of this?" he commenced; but before he could finish the sentence, the servant, regardless of his master's imperious bearing, had advanced towards Albert.

"Oh, sir!" he gasped imploringly, clutching Albert by the arm as he did so. "Come with me—let me hide you! I've heard the charge—fly whilst there's time! They're here! they're here!"

"They? Who?"

"The police!"

Albert shook off the hand of the frightened valet, as the door of the dining-room opened, and a commissary of police entered, wearing his scarf, and holding a paper in his hand.

Without glancing to the right or left, he advanced at once towards the young Viscount.

"Your name, I believe, is Albert Lionel de Valcourt, commonly called the Viscount de Valcourt?"

"Such is my name."

The police officer extended his hand, pronouncing, at the same time, the usual formula, "Viscount de Valcourt, in the name of the law, I arrest you!"

"Arrest me!—and upon what charge?"

"Murder!"

Awakened suddenly from the painful conversation that had taken place between his father and himself, the young man's glance wandered from face to face in utter bewilderment. It rested for a moment upon the indifferent countenance of the commissary of police, and then fixed itself upon the eager, scrutinizing visage of Old Corkscrew.

"Here is the warrant," added the commissary, unfolding a paper as he spoke.

Mechanically, Albert cast his eyes over it.

"The Widow Lerouge murdered!" he cried. Then added, in a whisper, but distinctly enough for his accents to be caught by the commissary of police and Old Corkscrew. "Then I am lost!"

Whilst the commissary of police fulfilled the usual formalities following upon an arrest, according to French jurisprudence, his agents had dispersed themselves about the Viscount's apartments, and proceeded to the most minute examination of all they contained. They had received orders to obey Old Corkscrew, and, under the direction of that astute individual, rummaged the prisoner's private papers; pulling out the drawers, upsetting their contents on the floor, and searching, with an exquisite patience, every article of clothing his wardrobe contained. It was a sight worth witnessing to have seen Old Corkscrew's face, when he called out certain articles, which were carefully written down in the official report.

First, in the passage or hall leading to the prisoner's rooms, which is profusely ornamented with old armor, was found a broken foil. This arm has a peculiarly-shaped hilt, not in use in the present day. It is orna-

mented with a count's coronet, with the initials "A.V." This foil is snapped in the middle, and the end has not yet been found. This prisoner, on being questioned, professes entire ignorance as to what has become of the missing piece.

Second, in a small room, serving as a lavatory, a pair of black cloth trousers, spotted with mud, the knees smeared with a greenish hue, as from a moss-grown wall. Also a rent on the right knee, as from a nail. The aforesaid trousers were not hung with the rest of the clothing in the wardrobe, but were thrown behind two traveling-trunks.

Third, in the pocket of the trousers above-mentioned were found a pair of pearl-gray gloves. The palm of the right-hand glove is marked with a green stain, as from moss or fresh grass. The ends of the fingers are torn, as from scratching or climbing. The backs of the gloves also are frayed, as if torn by the hands of an animal, human or otherwise.

Fourth, two pairs of boots, one pair carefully cleaned and varnished, but still very wet. An umbrella, moist from recent rain, its ferule covered with a whitish clay.

Fifth, in a large room, called the library, a box of cigars, called Trabucos; and upon the chimney-piece several tubes and holders, in amber and meerschaum.

These last articles being duly recorded, Daddy Tabaret approached the commissary of police.

"I have obtained all that I could have desired," he whispered. "That young man has spoken the truth for once. He is lost beyond hope of recovery."

In traversing the vestibule, Albert remarked the huddled groups of servants, and how they pointed and whispered, as though he had been a stranger. Then he heard a long low moan in the room beyond, followed by a heavy fall. His heart swelled, and then turned faint, as a voice cried for help, saying that the old Count had just been stricken with an apoplectic fit.

They almost carried the poor young fellow to the cab they had in waiting, and then he remembered no more, for he had fainted.

CHAPTER XXIV.

In the meanwhile, Monsieur Daburon, the magistrate, was awaiting with feverish impatience the arrival of a visitor.

Besides the warrant issued for the arrest of Albert de Valcourt, he had issued, others for the immediate appearance of the Count de Valcourt, Madame Gerdy, Noel, and several of the servants belonging to the young Viscount.

He wished to examine all these people before the arrival of the accused.

The person he now expected was Monsieur Noel Gerdy.

It was half-past nine in the morning, his usual hour for receiving witnesses and commencing business; but never in his life had he felt so nervous and utterly miserable at the thought of the ordeal that was before him.

At half-past ten an usher introduced "Monsieur Noel de Gerdy."

He entered with the easy, unembarrassed air of a man who is perfectly acquainted with all the ins and outs of a law court, and no one could have recognized in him the individual who had confided in Daddy Tabaret, much less the nervous lover of Miss Nellie Nicholson.

From the exquisite propriety of his dress, his quiet face, and repose of manner, even the most astute observer would scarcely have imagined that he had passed an evening and night replete with the most violent emotions, after a furtive visit to the girl he loved, followed by anxious hours passed at the bedside of a dying woman—and that woman, one whom he had, until then, believed to be his mother!

What a difference betwixt the magistrate and himself!

The magistrate also had passed a sleepless night—a fact that betrayed itself in his languid step, his careworn face, and the dark hollows round his eyes.

"You sent for me, sir," said the young barrister, bowing respectfully; "and I have lost no time in obeying your orders."

"You are, of course, aware," said Monsieur Daburon, returning the salutation, "of the unhappy nature of the business that has compelled your appearance here?"

"Yes, sir; the assassination of the poor old woman at the village of La Jonchere."

"Precisely; and if you think the summons somewhat hasty, it is simply because *your* name appears frequently in the papers found in possession of the Widow Lerouge."

"I'm not in the least surprised at that," answered the barrister; "we were much interested in the poor woman. She was my nurse, and I know that Madame Gerdy wrote to her very frequently."

"Very good! You will, of course, be able, then, to give us some information."

"Very insufficient, I'm afraid. In short, I know nothing of the poor creature in question. I was taken from her care in early infancy, and since I've been a man, I've hardly given her a thought, except to send her from time to time some pecuniary aid."

"You never went to her house?"

"Oh, yes—several times: but when I did, I only remained a few minutes. Madame Gerdy, who saw her often, and to whom she confided her most private affairs, can enlighten you upon the subject far better than I can."

"But," said the magistrate, "I am expecting Madame Gerdy. She has, of course, received a citation."

"She has; but she can't appear; she is ill."

"Dangerously so?"

"So dangerously that I think it would be advisable to give up all idea of her appearance in this case. She is attacked with a malady which, according to my friend Doctor Harvey, whose name you possibly know,

is fatal. It's something that has attacked the brain. Encephalitis, I think he called it. Her life, he said, might be saved, but never her reason."

Monsieur Daburon looked very grave.

"This is bad news, indeed," he murmured. "And so you think that it will be impossible to obtain any evidence in that quarter?"

"It's not even to be thought of. She is quite delirious, and when I left her, was in such a state of physical and mental prostration that I fear she'll not get through the day."

"And when was she taken with this illness?"

"Yesterday evening."

"Suddenly?"

"Yes, sir, apparently so; but, for my part, I've strong reasons to believe that she had been ailing for weeks past. Yesterday, on leaving the dinner-table, she took up the newspaper, and by an unfortunate chance her eyes fell upon the very paragraph that announced the murder. With a loud cry, she raised her hands to her head, staggered towards the sofa, then fell face downwards upon the ground, murmuring, 'Oh, unfortunate boy—unfortunate boy!'"

"Boy? Woman, you mean."

"No, sir; those were her words. Evidently the exclamation did not refer to my poor old nurse."

Upon this important answer, given in the most natural manner possible, the magistrate raised his eyes to the young man's face. The barrister bent his head.

"And what followed?" asked Monsieur Daburon, after a pause, during which he had been making notes.

"Those were the last words she uttered. With the help of our servant, I carried her to her bed, and at once sent for the doctor. Since then she has not recovered consciousness. The doctor, in fact"—

"Very good—very good!" interrupted Monsieur Daburon. "Stop where you are at present; we'll come to the medical evidence afterwards. Now, tell me on your oath, do you know if the Widow Lerouge had any enemies?"

"None that I know of."

"Good! She had no enemies, then; but do you know if there existed any one who might have been in any way benefited by her death?"

The magistrate fixed his eyes on Noel, as he asked this question.

The barrister hesitated, and seemed deeply moved—put out of countenance, in fact. In a faltering voice, he reiterated his former answer, "None that I know of."

"On your oath," said the magistrate, fixing his eyes still more penetratingly on the shifting ones that met his—"on your oath, can you say that you are not aware of any one who would profit by this crime?"

"I only know one thing, sir," answered Noel; "and that is, that it is likely to do me the most irreparable injury."

"At last," thought Monsieur Daburon, "we come to the letters, and I haven't as yet betrayed Old Corkscrew!" Then he said, aloud, "An irreparable injury to yourself? I don't understand."

Noel's embarrassment increased, rather than decreased, at this inquiry.

"I'm aware, sir," he answered, "that I ought to speak the truth and nothing but the truth, but still there are circumstances so delicate that a man of honor shrinks from unavailing them."

Monsieur Daburon stopped him by a gesture. The sad hesitating voice of Noel touched him.

"I know your story," he said; "but how I came by that knowledge, I am not at liberty to reveal."

The young barrister turned white to the very lips.

Then, after a pause, he told his story—a story which is already known to the reader.

With a rare eloquence, he expressed his feelings on the morrow of his discovery that he was *not* the son of Madame Gerdy, but the legitimate son of the Count Lionel de Valcourt. He spoke with feeling of the shock of the discovery, of his grief, his perplexities, his doubts.

Monsieur Daburon listened to Noel's story with the most intense attention. Not a word, not a gesture, not even a movement of the eyebrows, betrayed his impressions.

"And how, sir," observed the magistrate, "after having heard what you have told me, can you now say that no one, in your opinion, had any interest in the death of the Widow Lerouge?"

The young barrister was silent.

"It seems to me that the position of Albert de Valcourt becomes almost unassailable. Madame de Gerdy is insane. The Count will deny everything. And all your letters prove nothing. I must confess that this crime is the luckiest thing that could have taken place in the interests of the young Viscount."

"Oh, sir!" cried Noel in strong protest; "such an insinuation is dreadful!"

The magistrate looked narrowly into the face of the young barrister.

Was he speaking frankly, or playing a little game of his own?

Noel never moved a muscle, and replied almost immediately.

"What reason could this young man have to fear, or even be nervous, regarding his position? I have never threatened him, even in the most indirect way. I simply told him the facts of the case, asking him to think over them, and make a final decision."

"And he asked you to give him time?"

"Yes. I asked him to accompany me to the Widow Lerouge, whose evidence would clear away all his doubts, but he didn't seem to understand me. He knew the old woman well, however, having visited her constantly with the Count, from whom, to my knowledge, she had received large sums of money."

"Didn't this extraordinary generosity appear to you somewhat singular?"

"Not in the least."

"Can you explain why the Viscount didn't seem disposed to follow you?"

"Certainly. He told me he wished, above all things, to have an explanation with his father, who was out of town, but would return in a few days. Now I wished to have arranged everything without any public scandal—to have washed, in fact, our dirty linen at home."

"You didn't intend to go to law, then?" interrupted the magistrate, in a surprised tone.

"Not on any account! Do you think, sir," he added, proudly, "that to recover a name that belonged to me, I should commence by dishonoring it?"

M. Daburon's eyes brightened with a sincere admiration.

"I admire your unselfishness," he said, extending his hand as he spoke, and grasping that of the young barrister; "but it is my painful duty to tell you that justice must have its course; and that, perhaps, before this day is over, you may enter into possession of your rights. In fact, that at this very hour, Viscount Albert de Valcourt has been arrested for murder!"

"What!" exclaimed Noel, in a sort of stupor. "It's true, then; and I wasn't mistaken as to the real sense of your words! The fact is, I was afraid to understand their meaning."

"You understand them now, however, sir," interrupted Monsieur Daburon; "and I thank you for your frank and straightforward explanations. They most materially lighten the painful duty I have before me. Let me see you again to-morrow. In the meantime, I must ask you to forward me the letters which are in your possession."

"In an hour you shall have them," answered Noel. And, taking up his hat, he left, after having warmly expressed his gratitude to the magistrate.

A few minutes after, the door of Monsieur Daburon's office was again reopened, this time without any preliminary warning.

He looked up in angry surprise.

In the doorway stood the figure of the Count Lionel de Valcourt, stiff, pale and stern, like one of those ancient portraits that seem frozen in their golden frames.

CHAPTER XXV.

Yes; it was the Count Lionel de Valcourt—but rather the shadow than the man. His head, which he usually held so erect, was bent upon his breast; his figure was bent, his eyes had lost their fire, and his long white hands trembled as though he had been smitten with palsy.

In one night he had aged twenty years.

These robust and handsome old men resemble those ancient trees, whose interiors are eaten with decay, while the bark retains all the appearance of vigor and youth, but crumble into powder at the first rough touch.

They seem to defy the cruel hand of Time; but the first tempest lays them low.

The Count looked such an embodiment of despair that the magistrate shuddered with a feeling of genuine pity.

He rose, and handed him a chair, into which he sunk heavily.

"Pardon me!" he said; "but I feel so weak that I can hardly stand upright!"

Few, even amongst his friends, had ever heard the proud old man excuse himself; but now he spoke humbly, and as a child.

"I fear you are too ill, sir," said Monsieur Daburon, "to be able to aid me with any explanations upon this most painful affair?"

"Oh! I'm better—better, thank you!" answered the Count. "I feel as well as can be expected after the terrible shock I have received. I was stunned at the horrible news—that's all! only stunned! I'm better now—better now! My servants thought I was dead—would to Heaven that I were! The doctor says that the vigor of my constitution saved me; but I think that God wills that I should live, for some inscrutable purpose of His own!"

He stopped abruptly. A rush of blood to his face and throat seemed to suffocate him.

The magistrate remained standing, hardly daring to move.

After a few seconds, the old nobleman continued, in a tone of bitter self-reproach: "Fool that I have been, not to have foreseen it all! Isn't everything discovered sooner or later? I am punished where I sinned, by pride! I thought myself above the thunderbolt, and I have drawn the storm about my own house! My son a murderer! One of the De Valcourts a criminal at the bar! The very thought is madness! Oh, sir, punish me, for I alone am guilty! With me, an ancient name, that has existed without a stain for centuries, will be blotted out in ignominy!"

Monsieur Daburon had expected very different language from this. He thought to have met a proud and insolent aristocrat, who would have spoken to him with a galling condescension; and he had made up his mind to level his pride to the dust.

Perhaps it was, also, that a drop of bitterness remained in his innermost heart, when he remembered how the high-born Clare d'Arlange had refused to ally her name with his.

Whatever it was, his spirit changed within him into one of profound pity, as he witnessed the deep repentance and self-reproach of the grief-stricken man before him; and his only thought was how to console, rather than to blame.

"Write—write what I am about to tell you, for brain and heart alike seem failing me!" pursued the Count, with a feverish excitement, of which, a few minutes before an observer would have hardly thought him capable.

"Write my confession, and don't suppress a word. I want no pity, no delicacy on your part. Besides, what have I to fear now? Isn't our shame a thing proclaimed on the house-tops? Won't it be a public scandal in a

few days, that I, Lionel de Valcourt, will be forced to appear in court, to proclaim the infamy that I have brought on my ancient house and name? Write, sir, write; and let all the world know that I alone am guilty!"

He stopped for a moment, as though to collect and condense his ideas, and continued, in a voice that became firmer and more sonorous as he proceeded.

Without reservation, he told the magistrate of his relation with Valerie Gerdy, of his passionate and blind passion for her, of his unhappy marriage, of his substitution of the children, and of the cause of his desertion of Valerie. He told how a friend came—a cruel friend, envious of his happiness—and proved to him that Valerie was false—the woman he had taken from a garret, where she was gaining a miserable pittance with her needle, had betrayed, and was betraying her benefactor. He caused her to be watched, closely watched, and found that she received the visits of a young cavalry officer. "One day, entering her sitting-room, I saw," pursued the Count, "upon her table a riding-whip, a cigar-end, and a pair of military gloves, the cigar-end still burning. I retired," he continued, "unperceived. I was too fond to upbraid, too shocked to utter a word. Since that time I have never looked upon her face. She wrote, and I cast the letters into the fire unopened. She sought again and again to have an interview with me, but in vain. My servants had their orders from me, on pain of dismissal. What I suffered then no words can describe. In parting from her it seemed as if I were lacerating my own heart; but my anguish did not end here. Agonizing doubts arose in my mind as I looked in Albert's face. Was he really my child? and had I sacrificed my own son for the son of another? The mere thought was torture. Sometimes I was on the point of making a public confession, and reclaiming the legitimate heir to my name and lands; but old prejudices, belonging to birth and rank, held me back. I reeled, as it were, at the thought of the scandal and ridicule that would be heaped upon me. And now see how degraded I am; I cannot escape the infamy I have brought upon myself!"

The voice of the old nobleman died upon his quivering lips. With a gesture of despair, he veiled his face in his trembling hands; two heavy tears, which he brushed away impatiently, rolled down his wrinkled cheeks. Could this be the Count Lionel de Valcourt—a man proverbial for his icy hauteur, his reserve, and insolent disdain even to his equals in rank? This man, who revealed his whole life, without the slightest restrictions—and to whom? To a perfect stranger!

There was a silence in the room; then the magistrate spoke, in a voice that was rendered soft and low from emotion and pity.

"It will perhaps be a consolation to you," he said, "to know that Monsieur Noel Gerdy is worthy in every way of the high position in which you are about to place him. Perhaps you will find his character and temper are somewhat different than if he had been brought up by you. Misfortune and poverty are masters whose lessons leave deep and lasting impressions. He is a man of great talents, and, unless I mistake greatly, worthy of the traditions of his ancient race."

He was interrupted by the entrance of Noel, who was carrying a small black portfolio under his arm. The young barrister bowed respectfully before the old gentleman, who immediately rose, and, with an innate delicacy, moved to the further end of the room.

"Sir," said Noel to the magistrate, "you will find all the letters in this portfolio. I must ask your permission to leave you at once, as the illness of Madame Gerdy has taken a most alarming turn."

Noel had raised his voice in pronouncing these last words. The Count heard them, and started with a pained expression of face, as if the name just uttered called up sad memories of a once happy past.

"You must grant me a moment, however, Monsieur Gerdy," said the magistrate kindly; and rising, he placed his hand on the young barrister's arm. "Count Lionel de Valcourt," he said, "I have the honor of presenting to you Monsieur Noel Gerdy."

The Count never moved. Not a muscle of his face betrayed the slightest emotion. Noel, on the contrary, reeled like a man who has received a saber-thrust, and was obliged to support himself against the back of a chair.

Then these two—father and son—stood face to face, looking at each other with a sort of somber distrust.

Monsieur Daburon was disappointed. He expected a *coup de theatre*—a scene of pathos which would have left neither of his clients time for reflection.

The statue-like rigidity of the one, the intense emotion of the other, upset all his calculations, and he felt himself bound to make another and more decided move.

"Count de Valcourt," he commenced, in a tone of remonstrance, "it was but a few minutes ago that you owned to me that Monsieur Noel Gerdy was your legitimate son, and that you were prepared to make that declaration to the world."

The Count made no answer. One would have thought, from his extraordinary immobility, that he neither heard nor saw.

At last Noel, summoning up all his courage, broke the painful silence.

"Sir," he stammered, "I have nothing to reproach you with."

"You might have said *father*, instead of 'sir,'" interrupted the old man, in a tone that expressed neither tenderness nor emotion. Then, turning to the judge, "Can I be of any further use to you? If so, I am at your service."

"I shall only require you to hear your affidavit read over, and then to sign it."

He rang the bell for one of his clerks, who entered like an automaton, read the deposition quickly—all in a breath—without the slightest respect for comma, semicolon, or stop, or, for the matter of that, neither for

question or answer. When he had entirely exhausted his respiratory organs, he took a long breath, and commenced again, reminding one of a diver, who, from time to time, raises his head above water, takes a good mouthful of air, and then disappears.

The young barrister was the only one who listened to this reading, and listen he did with the most marked attention.

It told him many things he had not known before.

At last, the clerk, utterly out of breath, came to a stop with the decisive and unalterable words, "in faith of which, &c.," that ends all official reports in the French law courts, and presented the pen to the Count.

Without the slightest hesitation it was signed, and then the old nobleman rose, and turned towards Noel.

"I'm not very strong," he said, "and must, therefore, ask you, *my son*,"—he uttered the words with singular emphasis—"to help me to walk as far as my carriage."

The young barrister advanced eagerly, his whole face radiant with happiness as he placed the Count de Valcourt's arm in his, and led him gently from the room.

* * * * *

Let us now return to the unfortunate lover of Clare d'Arlange, who, under the heavy charge of murder, is lying, miserable and hopeless, in prison.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE position of Viscount Albert de Valcourt was indeed a most painful one. The servants had been carefully examined, and their evidence taken. It was very clear that one and all thought their young master guilty.

The life of Albert from the commencement of that fatal week of the murder, his lightest word, his most insignificant actions, were reported, commented upon, and explained.

The man who lives in the midst of thirty servants is like an insect in a glass box under the magnifying lens of a naturalist.

Our friend, Monsieur Daburon, had, therefore, in abundance those trivial details which at first appear as nothings, but which, when summed up, become a question of life or death. Thus, putting this and that together, the magistrate walked, as it were, in the footsteps of the young viscount hour by hour from the time of his rising on Sunday morning. And this was his programme. Immediately after the departure of Monsieur Noel Gerdy, he had given orders to his servants to announce to all visitors that he had gone into the country.

This aroused the suspicions of his "domestic" spies, for instead of going into the country, the young master remained in the library, locked in, only opening the door when his dinner was served, of which, as the cook observed, he didn't eat—only nibbled.

The rest of his actions, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, even to the writing of a letter to Clare d'Arlange, were all laid before the magistrate. Poor Monsieur Daburon was on the rack.

For about the twentieth time that morning, he cursed his fate for having mixed himself up in this miserable affair.

"Nothing in the world," he groaned, as he thought over the whole case, "can change my feelings towards this young man. I hated him. I love the woman he loves; and yet I am his judge. And what's worse, I once wished to murder him, out of the mad passion I felt for Clare d'Arlange. What stopped my finger on the revolver, Heaven knows! He might have been the accuser, and I the assassin. If the will is to be taken for the deed, then I ought to suffer the full penalty of the law."

As he passed the door—for he was walking the room with the restlessness of a wild animal—he heard in the corridor the heavy and measured steps of the police officers.

He had just time to sink into a chair before his desk, and pretend to be busily engaged amongst his papers.

Albert de Valcourt entered with head erect, and a firm step. His face was very pale, bearing the traces of sleepless nights and mental anxiety; but his eyes were clear and brilliant.

Luckily for Monsieur Daburon, he had already prepared a plan of questions, and had only to follow them, irrespective of his own inward thoughts.

"You are, of course, perfectly aware, sir," he commenced, in the most gentle and persuasive tones his voice could assume, "that you haven't the slightest right to the name you have taken?"

"I know, sir, that I am the illegitimate son of the Count de Valcourt. I am also aware that, according to the laws of my country, my father cannot acknowledge me, even if he would, as I was born *after* his marriage with the Countess."

"And what were your feelings on learning that?"

"I'll not hide them from you: they were those of the most intense pain and sorrow. When anyone has held as high a position in the world as I have, the fall is both terrible and agonizing. However, I have never for a single moment thought of contesting the rights of Monsieur Noel Gerdy."

"And yet," said the magistrate, losing all self-control, and springing to his feet, "you destroyed the chief witness in his favor when you murdered the Widow Lerouge!"

This terrible accusation, thundered forth as though delivered by an accusing angel, made not the slightest impression upon Albert. He didn't even start or change color.

"Before God," he answered, "and before all I hold sacred in this world, I am innocent! I am kept in close confinement, without the privilege even of seeing my friends. I am, therefore, powerless, and it is only in your sense of justice that I hope to establish my innocence."

"What an actor he would have made!" thought the

judge. "Is it possible that crime, by some mysterious force of its own, can furnish a man with nerves of steel?"

He looked over his bundle of papers concerning the case—referring to some passages, turning down the corners of pages, and marking others that contained paragraphs of importance. Suddenly he broke silence.

"When you were arrested, you exclaimed, 'I'm lost! I'm lost!' What did you mean by that?"

"Yes," answered Albert; "I perfectly remember having done so. Like a gleam of lightning, my position flashed across my mind. In less than a second I saw how hopeless it was. A voice seemed to whisper in my ears, 'Who could have any interest in the death of the Widow Lerouge, but yourself?' And the very conviction of the imminence of the peril in which I stood, caused the exclamation you speak of to burst from me."

Mr. Daburon admired the presence of mind shown in this answer, and the resources of the perverted imagination, which, turned in another direction, might have led to happy results.

"In fact," continued the judge, "you appear to have been greatly interested in the death of this poor woman; and there's another fact of which we are equally certain—namely, that the motive of robbery had nothing to do with this murder, for all the property thrown in the river has been recovered. We know, also, that the papers were burned. Could those papers have compromised any other person than yourself? Don't hold anything back. It's in your interest that I speak."

"I have no answer to make—I'm entirely ignorant of the whole affair."

"Did you visit this woman often?"

"Three or four times with my father."

"One of your grooms asserts that he has driven you there a dozen times."

"He must be mistaken. Apart from that what matters the number of visits?"

"Do you know the place, and the arrangement of the rooms?"

"Oh, perfectly. Two rooms on the ground floor; Claudine slept in the back parlor."

"Supposing that any evening you had rapped against her shutters, would she have admitted you?"

"Certainly, sir, and given me the warmest of welcomes."

"You were very ill a few days ago—why did you forbid your valet to call in a doctor?"

"My dear sir, what good could a doctor have done me? All his science could not have restored me to my former position as Viscount de Valcourt."

"But you behaved in a strange manner—destroyed your papers and letters?"

"I had made up my mind to quit the house. I think my having taken that resolution explains anything eccentric in my conduct."

To all these questions of the magistrate, Albert answered promptly, in a firm, clear voice, and without the slightest embarrassment.

"I'm on a wrong tack," thought Monsieur Daburon.

"Questioning him on these minute details won't do—I must strike a blow!" Then he said, aloud and promptly, "What were you doing last Tuesday evening, from six o'clock until midnight?"

For the first time the prisoner seemed disconcerted, and his eyes fell before those of the magistrate.

"What was I doing last Tuesday evening?" he stammered, repeating his phrase, in order to gain time.

"I've got him!" thought Monsieur Daburon, with a start of triumph. Then, aloud, "Yes; last Tuesday evening, from six to twelve?"

"Well, to tell you the truth," said the young man, smiling—what a haggard smile it was!—"I have a very bad memory."

"Oh, come, come, sir," interrupted the magistrate; "I'm not taxing your memory as to years ago. To-day is Friday; surely you can remember what you did on Tuesday."

"I recollect, now. I went out in the evening," murmured Albert.

"Be more exact. Where did you dine?"

"At home, as usual."

"No; not as usual. At dessert, contrary to your custom, you took brandy and water, instead of claret; and what's more, you nearly finished the decanter, which, I am told, contained a pint. You no doubt wished to brace up your nerves for some ulterior project—some business that required all your courage and energy."

"I had no necessity for a stimulant of any sort," answered the prisoner, in a voice that visibly faltered.

"You must be mistaken. Let me refresh that defective memory of yours. Two friends called upon you—before dinner, I believe—asking you to accompany them to the opera. You refused, on the plea of a pressing engagement."

"Oh, that was only a polite excuse to get rid of them."

"But why?"

"Can you ask me such a question? I was resigned, but still heart-broken. I was endeavoring to school myself down to endure the dreadful shock I had received. Don't the strongest of us long for solitude in the great sorrows of our life?"

"The accusation supposes that you wished for privacy that evening, in order to go to the village of La Jonchere. During the day you were heard to mutter to yourself, 'She must see me. She'll never be able to refuse me.' Of whom were you speaking?"

"Of a lady to whom I had written previously, and who had just replied to my letter."

"What have you done with that letter?"

"I burnt it."

"It compromised the lady, of course?"

A flush, that looked very like a flush of anger, darkened the prisoner's face.

"A true lady seldom compromises herself; and the lady that I speak of is one in the truest acceptance of the word!"

The magistrate jumped at a conclusion. The letter was from Clare d'Arlange. For a moment, his heart failed him. He loved her still, and her very name went like a dagger to his heart.

He turned back for a moment, and pretended to be arranging some papers.

"Give me the name of your correspondent."

"I cannot."

"Sir," said the magistrate, pulling himself up to his full height, and speaking in a severe tone, "I will not hide from you that your position is aggravated by the most culpable reserve. According to the laws of our country, you are here to answer every question I ask in a plain and straightforward manner."

"Yes—questions that concern my own reputation, but not the reputation of others."

Albert made this last answer in an angry tone. He was bewildered, astounded, irritated by this close questioning, which hardly left him time to breathe.

The interrogations of the magistrate fell upon his head like the blows of a blacksmith's hammer upon the red-hot iron that he is fashioning into shape.

This appearance of rebellion upon the part of the prisoner seriously disquieted Monsieur Daburon. Besides, he felt surprised and almost annoyed to find the perspicacity of his friend Old Corkscrew at fault. Just as if the volunteer detective was infallible.

Old Corkscrew, alias Daddy Tabaret, had predicted an *alibi*; but here was no *alibi* forthcoming! Had this cunning criminal some other card to play which would upset all their plans?

"Gently—gently!" reflected the magistrate. "I haven't got him yet! But to continue," he said aloud.

"After your dinner, what did you do?"

"I went out."

"Not immediately. When you had finished the brandy, you smoked in the dining-room, which being contrary to your custom, was remarked at the time. What cigars do you generally smoke?"

"Trabucos."

"You use a cigar-holder, don't you—in order to avoid the contact of the tobacco against your lips?"

"Yes, sir," said Albert, evidently astonished at these questions.

"At what time did you go out?"

"About eight."

"Had you an umbrella?"

"Yes."

"Where did you go to?"

"Only for a stroll."

"Alone, and without an end in view, the whole of that evening until midnight?"

"Yes, just so."

"Now tell me exactly the road you took?"

"My dear sir," expostulated the young man, "that would be almost an impossibility. I went out just for the sake of going out—for movement of some sort, to shake off the torpor which had weighed upon me for three days. I don't think you can quite enter into my feelings. I seemed to have lost all power of thought. I walked haphazard, not caring where my feet led me—along the bridges—through the streets—anywhere."

"All this is very improbable," interrupted the magistrate.

Monsieur Daburon might have remembered, however, that it was very possible. Hadn't he wandered, one unhappy night, after his interview with Clare d'Arlange, through the streets of Paris, with only one burning thought in his brain. Had he been questioned on the morrow, could he have retraced his footsteps?

Certainly not! But he had forgotten his anguish at that time, and only remembered now, that he had his duty to do in the cause of justice; reminding one of that celebrated fencing-master who, going through a mock duel with his dearest friend, became intoxicated at the gleam and clash of steel, and, in the excitement of the moment, lost his head, and killed him.

"Thus," continued Monsieur Daburon, "you affirm that you met no one who could swear that he saw you on the evening in question. You didn't speak to a mortal soul? You entered neither hotel, public-house, restaurant, or theater—not even a tobacconist's, to get a light for one of your Trabucos?"

"Yes; I affirm that."

"Well, sir, all I can say is, that it is most unfortunate for you—in fact, a positive calamity. It is my duty to inform you that it was during the evening of Tuesday last, between eight o'clock and midnight, that the Widow Larouge was murdered. Once more I implore you, in your own interest, to make an energetic appeal to your memory."

The indication of the day and hour of the murder seemed to overwhelm the prisoner with consternation. He raised his hand to his forehead with a gesture of despair. His answer, however, was given in a calm, voice.

"I am certainly very unfortunate, sir; but I have no further observations to make."

Monsieur Daburon was astounded.

What! Not even an attempt to prove an *alibi*? Not a word in self-defense—nothing? This could not be a pit-fall—a snare! No; not even a plan of defense! He must have been taken when off his guard, or probably had been over-confident as to the position he held in the world!

The magistrate rose, and took from a shelf, one after another, the great sheets of paper that covered the various objects that had been seized in Albert's rooms.

"We will now pass," he went on, "to the examination of the various charges that weigh so heavily upon you. Have the goodness to come here. Do you recognize these things as belonging to you?"

"Yes, all these are my property."

"Good! Now examine this foil. Who broke it?"

"I did, in fencing with Monsieur D'Arcy. He can witness to the fact."

"He shall be summoned. And what has become of the broken end?"

"I don't know. My servant would be the best person to give you information on that subject."

"Of course. He declares to have carefully searched for it, but without success. Now I must call your attention to the circumstance that the victim must have been struck with a foil, deprived of its button, and sharpened afterwards. This piece of stuff, upon which the assassin wiped his weapon after the murder, is proof."

"I implore you, sir, to give orders that the most minute search be made upon this point. It is impossible but that the other end of this foil must be found."

"Special orders shall be given. Now observe. Traced upon this paper are the footprints of the murderer. Here is one of your boots; the sole exactly fits the mark. This piece of plaster had fixed itself in the impression made by the heel. You will remark that your boot-heels are precisely the same."

Albert followed with an intense attention every movement of the magistrate. It was very evident that he was struggling against growing terror.

Was he invaded by that fear which often stupefies criminals when they are on the point of being detected?

To all the remarks of the magistrate, he answered in a hollow voice.

"True, true; perfectly true."

"Again," continued Monsieur Daburon, "here is another piece of evidence. The culprit had an umbrella. The end of this umbrella having stuck in some wet clay, the piece of wood which protected the silk was deeply encrusted with the same. Now look! Here is the piece of clay, taken off with the most delicate care; and here is your umbrella. The form of the clay fits the piece of wood. How do you explain this? Are they the same or not?"

"It might be an accident," said Albert. "Umbrellas are made by the thousand in the very same shape and color."

"Well, let that pass. Here is a cigar end, found on the premises where the crime was committed. Tell me to what sort it belonged, and in what manner it has been smoked?"

"It's a Trabucos, and it has been smoked with a holder."

"Like these—is it not so?" insisted the magistrate, showing the cigars, their amber and meerschaum holders, which had been found upon the chimney-piece in the library of the Count de Valcourt's mansion.

"Yes," murmured Albert. "There is a fatality in this."

"Patience! I've not done yet. The assassin of the Widow Lerouge wore gloves. The victim, in her desperate struggle for life, had grasped the hands of the murderer, and some of the kid leather of the gloves remained in the nails. The morsels have been extracted, and here they are. Pearl-gray—is it not so? The gloves you wore on Tuesday evening were pearl-gray, and they have been found scratched and torn. Compare these pieces with your gloves. Are they not the same even in color and texture?"

What was the use of denying it? The evidence was there clear as the noon-day sun.

Albert was terror-stricken.

A cold perspiration burst upon his forehead, and trickled slowly down his temples. His hands trembled so that he hadn't the force to clasp them.

"This is dreadful—horrible!"

"In short," pursued the inexorable magistrate "here are the very trousers you wore on the night of the murder. It is very evident that they have been wet; and apart from stains of mud, they bear traces of fresh earth. Look here—and here! Above all, they have been torn at the knee. Granted, that your memory fails you as to the locality of your walk on Tuesday evening, but you cannot make me believe that you have forgotten the rent in your trousers, and the torn condition of your gloves."

What courage could resist such overwhelming attacks? The firmness and energy of the prisoner were visibly giving way. His head swam. He sunk heavily into a chair, murmuring as he did so:

"I shall go mad—mad!"

"Confess," insisted the magistrate, whose eyes became absolutely insupportable in their intense gaze upon the unhappy young man—"confess that no one but you could have had any interest in the death of the Widow Lerouge."

"I confess," said Albert, "that I am the victim of one of those astounding events that makes one's reason totter. Still, I am innocent."

"If so, then tell me where you passed Tuesday evening."

"Of course," cried the prisoner, "if I told you that I should be saved." Then he added, in a voice that was hardly audible: "But I must not speak—I cannot—I dare not!"

Monsieur Daburon rose. In theatrical language he was about to produce his greatest effect.

"You have left it then to me," he said, with just a tinge of irony in his voice, "to refresh your failing memory, and to recall to it all that occurred to its owner. On Tuesday evening, at eight o'clock, you left your house in a state of great mental excitement. At half-past eight you took the train from the St. Lazare Station, and at nine you got out at Rueil."

And quietly appropriating all the ideas of Old Corkscrew as though they were his own, the magistrate repeated nearly word for word the improvised tirade that the Daddy had delivered the night before. And whilst speaking, he could not help admiring the extraordinary penetration of this volunteer detective. In all his life his eloquence had not produced such an impression. Every sentence—nay, every word—told; and the confidence of the prisoner, already sadly shaken, fell bit by bit, like the stones from a wall that is being bombarded with cannon.

Albert was like a man rolling down a precipice—who sees every branch failing him—every resting-place give way; and who feels a new and more painful wound at every rugged point his body is hurled against.

"And now," concluded the magistrate, "listen to good advice. Don't persist in a system of obstinate denial, which it is utterly impossible to sustain. We are in possession now of all the facts. Believe me, it would be a far better policy for you to throw yourself on the indulgence of the court by confessing all."

Monsieur Daburon hardly supposed that the prisoner would dare to hold out any longer; but in this he was entirely mistaken.

However great the prostration of Albert may have appeared, he found, by a supreme effort of his will, strength enough still to recover himself, and once again to protest.

"You are certainly in the right, sir," he said sadly; "appearances are decidedly against me. In your place I would have spoken as you have done; and yet I swear that I am innocent! I am overwhelmed for the moment—but I do not despair. My honor and my life are in the hands of God! Even at this very hour, in which I must seem to you as a dead man, I still hope and believe in a most entire acquittal of every charge made against me! In fact, I await it as a certainty."

"I don't understand you," interrupted the magistrate.

"I've said nothing more than I mean."

"Thus you persist in your denial?"

"I am innocent!"

"But this is madness!"

"I am innocent!"

There was nothing more to be said, and after a few formalities had been gone through—such as reading over the prisoner's examination to him—he was conducted back to his cell, the magistrate still exhorting him to confess.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHEN Monsieur Daburon was once more alone, and could give himself the luxury of "a good think," he felt by no means that inward satisfaction which all of us feel when we know that we have made a great success.

He felt that he had succeeded admirably in proving the guilt of the young Viscount; yet something—a something that he could not exactly define—moved within him, and made him miserable.

He had triumphed; yet his victory gave him no joy—only discomfort, sadness, and disgust.

Another reflection, so simple in itself that he wondered it hadn't occurred to him before, agumented his discontent, and gave a finishing touch to his ill-temper and self-reproach.

"What will Clare d'Arlange think of me for having undertaken this case? Had I refused it, I might have gone to her. Poor darling! My sweet, gentle, good, patient Clare! Her grief must be dreadful. Had I remained her friend, as she asked me to be, I might have had the privilege of consoling and encouraging her in her fearful trial—of holding her hands in mine—of mingling my tears with hers. After a time perhaps—time softens so many sad memories—she might have been a little grateful to me—she might!"

He paused, and hid his face in his hands.

"No—no; she knows it all now! Whatever happens, I shall be to her an object of detestation and horror. I have dug a grave between us—the grave of her lover!"

Never had he hated Albert de Valcourt more than he did at that moment. And, above all, he cursed Daddy Tabaret.

"If it hadn't have been for that wretched Old Corkscrew, I might have taken things more quietly. It was his horrid—his fiend-like enthusiasm that led me on. Oh, if I only had him here now! If I only had him here now, I'd beat his ugly head into a pulp!"

It was precisely at this favorable moment for a visit that two smart raps were given at the door, and without waiting for a reply, the figure of Daddy Tabaret sprang into the room with all the astonishing suddenness of a Jack-in-the-box.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

OLD CORKSCREW was evidently in a state of wild excitement, or he would have noticed that his friend, the magistrate, held a ruler, which he had caught up from his desk, somewhat tightly in his hands, and seemed about to carry the threat he expressed in our last chapter into execution.

"Well," cried the Daddy, "what's your opinion now? Isn't he *smashed*?"

"Hold your tongue, you old fool!" answered the magistrate. "He's guilty, of course; but it is not in a man of my position to jump at conclusions like you do!"

The old man stood petrified. He had expected to be landed to the skies, and here, metaphorically speaking, was a smack in the face, and no mistake!

"I have come," he said, humbly, "only in the interests of justice!" Then he paused, and twirled his old hat in his trembling hands. "I'm heart and soul in the case—I am indeed! I thought, perhaps, you might have wanted me about the *alibi*, you know!"

"There's no *alibi*!" answered the magistrate, turning his back, and walking to the window.

"What!" cried the old man; "no *alibi*? What a fool I am! Of course, you checkmated him—bowled him out, eh?"

"I didn't succeed in doing anything of the sort!" said Monsieur Daburon, impatiently. He denies everything! He confesses that the proofs against him are decisive! He won't give—or, rather, he pretends to forget everything that occurred on Tuesday evening!

And at the same time he protests his entire innocence of the crime."

In the middle of the room stood Old Corkscrew, his round face expressive more than ever of a stupid astonishment—his pug nose sniffing the air.

Notwithstanding his indignation and ill-temper, Monsieur Daburon couldn't repress a smile.

"What! no *alibi*?" murmured the amateur detective. "Then I'm a duffer—a fool—an ass! No *alibi*! It's impossible! He must be chaffing us; or else we are entirely mistaken?"

There was a pause; during which Old Corkscrew again sniffed the air, like an old hound that has lost the scent. Suddenly his head dropped, and his wrinkled hands fell to his sides—even his coat-tails seemed to go between his legs.

"Yes," he whined, dejectedly; "I'm all in the wrong! I see it now—it can't be the man!"

Here he again sniffed the air; then suddenly advanced towards the magistrate, and seized him by the arm.

"Monsieur Daburon," he commenced, "pardon me; I may seem to you to be unduly excited."

"Yes," interrupted the magistrate; "and, what's more, you have certainly been paying a visit to the wine shop round the corner."

"Stop!" said the old man, with dignity; "don't insult me! My nerves are strung to the highest pitch! I am heart and soul in this case! Remember, it's a question of life and death!"

"Unfortunately," said the magistrate, with a sad shake of the head, "it is but too clearly proved that the Viscount Albert de Valcourt is the murderer of the Widow Lerouge. However, don't let me bias your opinion; read his own evidence, and judge for yourself."

Without a word in reply, the Daddy sat himself at the clerk's desk; and planting his elbows on the table, and his fingers in his hair, commenced reading the whole case with a hungry avidity.

When he had finished, he rose, with a scared and frightened look.

"Sir," he whispered to the magistrate, his pale lips quivering so painfully, that they were hardly able to frame the words; "I have been the involuntary cause of a great injustice. *This man is innocent!*"

"Come, come!" said Monsieur Daburon, gathering up his papers, and then buttoning his great coat, preparatory to his departure. "You've lost your head, my poor old friend. Sleep upon it, and you'll be yourself again to-morrow. When you reflect upon what you've just read—"

"Yes, sir—yes; when I reflect upon what I have just read, I implore you to stay the case, or you will only be adding another error to the deplorable list of judicial blunders. The Viscount is in prison, isn't he?"

"Yes; and there he shall remain, if you please," interrupted the magistrate, ironically. "I can't understand a man playing fast and loose, as you do. Think what you said last night. You were positive as to his guilt, while I hesitated."

"That's just it!" cried the old man, dancing about the room in a sort of impatient self-remorse. "Idiot and fool that I am, not to have made myself understood! This was my plan; these were my deductions. A crime has been committed, with its various circumstances and details. I construct, piece by piece, a plan of my own, which, like a Chinese puzzle, shall fit into each in the most exact manner. If otherwise, then we have pounced upon the wrong person. Now, sir," said Daddy Tabaret, getting more and more excited as he went on, "I have paid particular attention to this case. I have examined the work, and I will give the workman his due. He's a clever scoundrel, whoever he is; and do you think such a man would have neglected a precaution that would have been resorted to by the most blundering thief that ever came under your experience? It's impossible! I am sure of my plan or system, or whatever you like to call it, as of a sum in subtraction which has been proved. The murderer of the Widow Lerouge has an *alibi*. The Viscount Albert de Valcourt doesn't even attempt to prove one; therefore, he is innocent."

Monsieur Daburon watched Old Corkscrew with that half-pitying gaze that one accords to monomaniacs.

"Dear old boy," he said, "you have only one fault, you sin on the side of over-subtlety. You think everyone else as clever as yourself. Our man has been caught because he was utterly reckless. He thought himself, on account of his social position, above suspicion."

"No, sir!—no, sir!" interrupted Tabaret—"a thousand times no, sir! You are utterly and entirely mistaken! My villain—the *true* villain, mind you—feared everything!"

"Well," said the magistrate, losing all patience, "if Albert de Valcourt, having interest in getting the old woman out of the way, didn't commit the crime, who did? His father, perhaps?"

This was said with a sneer, but the Daddy didn't see it. He was too much in earnest.

"No, it wasn't the father—my villain was young."

"Good-by, Monsieur Tabaret," said the magistrate, taking up his hat. "I think we are only wasting our time in useless controversy. To-morrow, we shall wake up, like giants refreshed with wine. Good-by—good-by!"

He had gained the door, but Daddy Tabaret sprang forward and barred the way.

"Sir! sir!" he cried, with impassioned gestures, "in the name of Heaven, don't go away without hearing me! This young man is innocent—I swear it! Help me in my researches—help me!"

But the magistrate shook his head, and putting the enthusiast aside, walked rapidly down the corridor, and turning a corner, was lost to sight.

Closing the door behind him, Old Corkscrew followed,

threading the long, dark galleries of the Palace of Justice like a lost spirit.

Business hours were over, and as his solitary footsteps resounded along the stone corridors, it seemed to the old man as though he were wandering through a city of the dead.

He leant against one of the blank walls, and burying his face in his hands, cried like a little child.

"Hot-headed fool that I am!" he thought; "I have helped to convict an innocent man! Poor fellow! Who knows but, in the horror and anguish of his position, he may commit suicide? Poor humanity—poor humanity! But I'll be to the fore!—I'll be to the fore! I'll get him off, and I'll pounce on the real rascal yet; and, what's more, I'll get my old friend Noel to help me. That fellow has brains; and it's a thousand pities he wasn't in the police!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

WE will now return to the Count Lionel de Valcourt and his newly-found son.

From the time of their departure to the time of their arrival at the Count's mansion, not a word had been exchanged between them.

When the carriage drew up before the steps, and when the Count descended, aided by Noel, there was a commotion among the servants.

Since the morning, the great Valcourt scandal had made quite a noise in the neighborhood. A thousand versions were circulated, reviewed, corrected, and augmented by Envy, Hatred, Malice, and all Uncharitableness. Some were simply idiotic, the others absolutely wicked in their venom.

Twenty or thirty of the Count's friends, some of them bearing names that dated back for centuries, were mean enough to send their servants to make inquiries at the Count's house.

"Alas for poor Humanity!" said poor Old Corkscrew. And on this occasion we can certainly echo his lament.

At present, the Count is seated in his library.

The old gentleman has recovered his calmness. In fact, if possible, he is more "starched" in his manner than ever. He feels that he has humiliated himself before the magistrate. He is angry with himself for his momentary weakness, and, in consequence, upsets our young friend the barrister.

They have had a long conversation already, in which Noel has made a great impression upon his father, apropos of his brother Albert—a conversation which we give verbatim to our readers.

"He is my brother, sir, and your son. For thirty years he has borne the name of De Valcourt. Innocent or guilty, he has the right to look to us for help in his hour of need; and help him we must."

The old Count's eyes were dim with tears. He grasped the barrister's hands.

"Thank you," he said. "I'm so sorry for the poor boy! Let's do our best for him. My heart's nearly broken;" and he bent his gray head on his hands.

"I'll save him, if he's innocent," pursued the barrister; "and I'm almost sure he is. I'm not an amateur in my profession. I know the law to my finger ends, and I'll undertake his case. I don't care how heavy the charges may be against him, I'll knock them away like thistle down. I'll kick all doubts aside just as I would the snow-flakes from my feet; and I will flash the light of truth into the minds of those who are seated in judgment upon him."

"But suppose he confesses?" objected the Count.

"What then?"

"Then, sir," said Noel, with a tragic air, "I would render him the last service that true love can render in such a misfortune. I would give him the means to avoid death and degradation."

"Well spoken, sir," said the old Count—"well spoken, my son!"

He held out his hand to Noel, who bent over and pressed it with a silent respect.

The barrister breathed again. At last he had found a road to the heart of this haughty old aristocrat. He had made a conquest. He had succeeded in pleasing him.

"Let us return to the question of yourself," said the Count. "We, of course, breakfast, dine and sup together. My servants understand that. I don't want to interfere with your present arrangements; but we'll go over the rooms that have been prepared for you. Those of poor Albert I have ordered to be shut up for ever, just as he left them. Poor boy!—poor boy!"

Noel had the courage to place his hand on the old gentleman's arm.

"Sir," he said, "when you gave me the order to follow you at the Palace of Justice, I did so because it was my duty. I have another—nay, I say a more sacred duty to fulfill. Madame Gerdy is dangerously ill—so ill that the doctor has almost given her over. Ought I to be absent from the bed of one who has been the best of mothers to me?"

"Valerie! Valerie!" murmured the Count.

He bent his head upon his arm upon the back of the sofa, and the past came back to him with all the vividness of to-day.

"She wronged me!" he answered to his accusing angel; "I loved her dearly, but she spoilt my life! She deceived me, but I loved her! Time has been the avenger; I can forgive her now, poor Valerie! She is dying—her heart is broken about Albert—our son! and it was I who made her sin—I suggested the whole plot! Poor Valerie! Perhaps, if I went to her now, one word from me might lighten her great sorrow."

He rose and turned toward Noel.

"Ring for my coat and hat. We will go and sit by her bedside together."

The young man started at this unexpected proposition.

"Oh, sir!" he said eagerly, "spare yourself a most painful scene. Madame Gerdy may be alive still, but her brain is gone. The shock to her nervous system has been more than she can bear. The poor thing will not be able even to recognize you, or hear the voice she once loved so well!"

"Go, then, and go alone," sighed the Count. "Good-bye, my son!"

Those two words, "My son," said with marked intonation, sounded like the trumpet of victory to Noel's ears.

* * * * *

When the young barrister had left, the Count fell back in his chair, with a great sigh of relief.

To be alone was a luxury! Since the morning, events had crowded upon him with such a giddy rapidity that he had felt perfectly dazed. At last he was alone! At last he could snatch a few moments for reflection!

"This, then," he thought to himself, "is my legitimate son—the man who is to bear our ancient name, like the Bayard of old, 'without fear, and without reproach.' It won't do for me to repudiate him now; the scandal is too great. He's so like me, also; my living portrait at thirty? Not a bad-looking fellow, by Jove!—a devilish good-looking fellow! His face is a splendid letter of recommendation, full of intelligence, yet delicate and timid as a woman's. He can be deferent without being a sneak, and firm without being arrogant. In fact, he is a De Valcourt, and no mistake!"

The poor old gentleman had worked himself into this self-laudatory state; but, somehow, he was entirely dissatisfied and uncomfortable.

"Poor Albert!" he thought—"poor boy! I never made enough of him when he was with me. How I loved him!—ah! how I love him still!" And, bending his proud old head in his hands, the Count burst into tears.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"Yes, I will do my duty as a man!—at least I ought to see Albert's mother, and forgive her before she dies!" He rushed to the window, in the hope of seeing Noel, and recalling him; but the courtyard of the mansion was silent and deserted, and the Count had nothing else to do but sink back in his great arm-chair, with his own sad thoughts for company.

CHAPTER XXX.

In leaving the Count's house, Noel had taken a cab, promising the driver an extra fare for driving quickly.

Arrived at his door, he threw rather than gave the man his money, and mounted the stairs two steps at a time.

"Has any one been inquiring after me?" he asked of the maid.

"No one, sir."

He seemed relieved, drew a long breath; then asked again, in a quicker tone, "And the doctor?"

"He called this morning," said the girl, "when you were away, sir, and he looked very grave indeed. He came back again half an hour ago, and he is still in missus's room."

"All right—I'll see him. If any one calls, show them into my study—here's the key—and call me directly."

In entering the sick room, Noel saw at a glance that no change for the better had occurred during his absence.

The sick woman, with close-shut eyes, and convulsed face, was lying on the bed in mortal agony. One might have thought her dead, were it not for the sudden movements of the pale hands, and the raising of the counterpane from time to time, as she moved her limbs in pain.

Above her head, under which they had placed a piece of oil-cloth, was a large piece of ice, which trickled slowly down her temples, which were spotted by strange stains of a bluish tint. Upon the table and the chimney-piece were phials and galley-pots of every size and shape, interspersed with half-emptied cups and glasses.

At the foot of the bed, a piece of calico, stained with blood, announced that leeches had been resorted to. At the chimney-place, where a brisk fire was burning, knelt a Sister of Mercy, watching the cooking of something in a saucepan. In an arm-chair beside the bed sat Doctor Harvey, apparently superintending with great interest the operations of the Sister of Mercy.

He rose eagerly at the entrance of Noel.

"At last you have come!" he exclaimed, seizing his friend by both hands.

"I've been detained at the court," said the barrister, feeling it necessary to give some reason for his long absence; "but you can imagine upon what pins and needles I've been since this morning."

Then he bent his head and whispered, in a trembling voice, "Well—how is she?"

The doctor shook his head with a thoroughly disheartened look.

"She's worse! much worse!" he answered. "Since this morning, every symptom has increased in gravity; in fact, I think it my duty to tell you that I fear there is but little hope!"

He stopped suddenly. The barrister had seized his arm, and was gripping it so tightly, that he could hardly repress an exclamation of pain. Madame Gerdy moved slightly, and a faint groan escaped her white lips.

"She heard you," murmured Noel.

"I wish she had," said the doctor, quietly. "It is just as well she should know the truth—anyway, let us see."

He approached, and leaning over the sick woman, took her listless hand in his, and felt her pulse. Then, with his forefinger, he delicately raised her eyelid.

The eye was upturned, fixed and glassy.

"Come," said the doctor; "judge for yourself! Take her hand! Speak to her!"

Trembling from head to foot, Noel advanced, and bending over the bed, so that his lips almost touched the cheek of the dying woman, he murmured, softly, "Mother, mother, speak to me! It's Noel; your son—your own child! Speak to me! Make me a sign that you hear me!"

Not a word. There she lay in her frightful stillness, not a spasm now agitating the stone-like rigidity of her features.

"You see!" said the doctor. "Didn't I tell you?"

"Poor thing!" sighed Noel. "Does she suffer?"

"Not now; but her agony must have been beyond all telling."

The Sister of Mercy had risen, and approached the side of the bed.

"Everything is now ready, sir," she said to the doctor.

"Call in the servant then, and she will help us in putting on the mustard poultices," was Dr. Harvey's reply.

The girl came at once, and the two women raised the almost lifeless form of Madame Gerdy in their arms.

Noel, during this time, had retired into the embrasure of the window, leaning his burning forehead against the window-pane.

Of what was he thinking, whilst there lay dying, a few steps from him, she who had given him so many proofs of maternal devotion, and disinterested love and care? Did he regret her? or was he thinking of that great and luxurious existence that awaited him in the grand old house in the Faubourg St. Germain? He started, and turned quickly, on hearing the voice of his friend at his ear.

"We have done, now," said the doctor, "and will wait to see what effect the mustard poultices will have. If she feels them, it will be a good sign; if not, we'll try cupping."

"And if that doesn't take effect?"

The doctor only answered by one of those movements of the shoulders which express that the case would be then beyond all human skill.

"I understand your silence, Harvey," murmured Noel. "There's no hope—is it not so?"

"None from science. Still I don't despair," was the reply.

"What makes my heart ache is to see her so utterly unconscious of all that is taking place around her. Will she die without recovering her reason? Won't she recognize me, nor speak to me?"

"I can't say. This malady, my poor fellow, is one of those that may, at any moment, utterly upset the rules laid down for it. The symptoms are always varying, and the patient that we pronounce nearly out of danger to-day may be something more than at death's door to-morrow."

"She may speak, then?"

"Very probably."

"And"—Noel hesitated—"with the full possession of her senses?"

"Perhaps; but why do you ask me?" And, for the first time, the doctor looked his friend curiously in the face.

"Because one word—but one, pronounced by her lips—would be invaluable to me."

"Oh, you mean about your case? Well, as regards that, I can promise nothing. You have as many chances in your favor as against you. Only on no account quit the house; keep close at hand. If her reason returns, and it will be as the lightning flash, profit by it whilst you have time; it is the advice of a friend and a doctor. And now good-bye for the present." And without waiting for a reply, he seized up his hat, and was gone.

But there was no peace for Noel that day.

He was just returning to the sick-room, when the servant announced that a gentleman—"a queer sort of gentleman, who wouldn't give his name—was waiting for him in the study."

With a half-muttered curse, and a gloomy air, the barrister turned on his heel, and proceeded to his private room.

The "queer sort of gentleman," described by the maid, met him at the door.

"At last you have come, Monsieur Ducroe. You've been so long about it, that I gave you up altogether."

"Ha, ha! Better late than never—better late than never!" said the visitor, placing his hat on a chair. "That's my motto, sir; that's my motto!"

Noel muttered something that didn't sound complimentary.

"I've called at the desire of a lady, a dear friend of yours; and, I may say, a dear friend of mine—Miss Nellie Nicholson."

Noel smiled, a forced smile, and pointed to a chair.

His visitor was a person well known in the money-lending world. He had no occasion to advertise, he was known everywhere. He was quite celebrated for his amiable and urbane character, and, having a great deal of money to spare, he had no objection to lend it to his friends. In recompense of which small service, he kindly consented to take an interest from twenty to fifty per cent.

Worthy man! he had a real affection for his clients. He was never known to have imprisoned a debtor—he preferred pursuing him, and hunting him down for ten or fifteen years; and after he had obtained his money piecemeal by piecemeal, generally left him with a broken heart, or comfortably settled in the work-house.

The people he preferred principally to deal with were ladies of doubtful reputation; theatrical people, who had fallen into difficulties, either from the failure of some speculation, or through ill-health; also those audacious beings whose existence depends solely on those

who require their aid and assistance, such as authors, barristers, and doctors.

To ladies, he lent upon their beauty—while it lasted. To men, striving men, upon their talent—while it lasted.

"Wonderful people!" he would say; "they're like rare Bohemian glass—things to be admired and speculated upon; but"—and here he would wink his wicked old eye—"likely to be broken at any moment. Give a woman a splendid face—give a man a large talent and no friends—and it is only a question of time. Their desires are beyond their means. It only becomes a question of time which will smash first—the health or the pocket!"

A deadly old man to call "patron" and friend was Monsieur Ducroe. He was like the awful "sea-devil" described by Victor Hugo—a something soft and pulpy; a thing of suckers, who embraced you every way, drawing the life-blood from you with its caressing but deadly touch. And this was the man Nellie Nicholson had sent to the man she hoped to be her future husband. A brain of feather and a heart of lead, like the Lamia of the old Greek fable; woman and serpent combined.

Old Ducroe had trusted a great deal to Nellie's beauty.

"A jewel of price, sir!" he would say,—"a jewel of price! Flawed, as they all are; but, where fools are plentiful—and where are they not?—a safe investment in the market. Look at this hard-headed lawyer, to wit; why, sir, that man would 'botanise on his mother's grave,' as the saying is, if he could only pluck a flower to place upon his mistress's resplendent bosom. A great man, sir, is Noel Gerdy—a great man, full of small sins! You've heard of the tiny but ever active worm, that eats into the stately ship; till, one day, suddenly, with sails full set for fortune and colors flying, *down* it goes—down—down—into the unfathomable depths of the sea! In that ship you have a picture of this energetic, all-seeking barrister; in that worm you see the woman, one of ten thousand, who slowly drags him downwards to certain ruin and death!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE barrister—who knew the man he had to deal with, and how he was to be softened by considerate attention, and his vanity tickled by treating him as an equal—commenced by offering him a chair, and asking anxiously after his health.

Ducroe gave him the most minute details concerning it. He had been to a dentist about a back tooth, that had given him the most excruciating agony. Dentist looked at it—pronounced it sound—refused to draw it—and ending by stopping it.

"Cost me a pound, sir—cost me a pound!"

His eyesight, also, was causing him some uneasiness.

"Had to make out a little bill the other day at six months date at ten in the morning, and had to light the gas, sir—had to light the gas, just as if it were ten at night!"

His legs, too, were getting shaky—couldn't call upon his friends on foot.

How delighted his friends would have been, thought Noel, if they could have dispensed with those calls which he so pertinaciously made.

At last, his chapter of miseries was exhausted; and, clearing his throat, he commenced:

"Well, sir, how about those bills I have of yours? I'm devilishly in want of money! Let me see; the first was for five hundred—the second for seven hundred—and the last, two hundred and fifty."

"Come—come, Monsieur Ducroe!" said Noel, laughing a forced laugh: "a joke's a good thing in the right place!"

"But I'm not joking!" said the usurer.

"Well, it looks very like it. Why, it's only ten days ago that I wrote to tell you I couldn't meet them, asking at the same time, to have a renewal."

"I got your letter, sir—I got your letter; but I thought that, in the way of business, no answer was considered a negative."

A gesture of impatience escaped the young man.

"Do as you like; I've already told you I can't meet your demands!"

"Well, some people have no conscience! Do you know that I've renewed these bills four times already—four times, sir? Why, I wouldn't have done it for my own mother, sir—not for my own mother!"

"I dare say not," said the barrister, dryly; "but, you see, *your* mother would never have paid the interest I have—she would have been to downy for that, considering that *you* are her son!"

Monsieur Ducroe was much hurt.

He couldn't bear the word "interest" to be named; so it was in a tone that bore in it more of sorrow than anger, that he replied, "Have I ever complained?—have I ever said a word in reproach? The only remark I have to make is, that you know I've a soft heart, and you play upon it accordingly."

"What's the use of repeating a thing over and over again?" said Noel, still more impatiently than before. "I've told you that, at the present moment, I'm hard up; in fact, there's only just enough ready money left to keep me going."

"I'm sorry to hear it, for your sake," said the money-lender; "because you'll force me to place the whole business in the hands of my solicitors."

"And what will you gain by that? Come, my dear sir, let us play our cards on the table. Do you wish to fill the pockets of your solicitors? I hardly think so. When you have put me to a great expense, will that put a farthing in your pocket? You can't put a distress in, because the house and all the furniture belong to Madame Gerdy."

"I know it; and, even if you were sold up, they wouldn't cover my expenses."

"So you intend to thrust me into a debtor's prison? A bad speculation that! My social position would be

lost; in fact, I'd be a ruined man, and where would be your gain?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the worthy money-lender. "What nonsense you're talking! Old birds can't be caught with chaff! Why, if you thought I were capable of shutting you up—and you know I wouldn't, because I've got such a soft heart—my money would be there; yes, sir, there—in that very drawer as rests under your elbow!"

And the old man, still laughing, pointed to where Noel's arm rested.

"You are entirely in the wrong. Had I the money I owe you, it would be in your hands this moment, I can't ask my mother, you see."

A sardonic, annoying sort of laugh, peculiar to Monsieur Ducroe, interrupted Noel's expostulation.

"Oh, I know all about that! You've borrowed enough from your mother already; and if the poor old lady is about to kick the bucket—I've heard she's been very ill—well, sir, I wouldn't advance a fiver upon the goods she leaves behind her."

The young barrister crimsoned with anger; his eyes flashed, and it was as much as he could do to restrain himself from the immense satisfaction of giving the old gentleman a black eye.

"One knows what one knows!" continued Ducroe, tranquilly, taking a pinch of snuff; "and I know that, whether you intend to marry Miss Nicholson or not, she's about the most expensive young woman out. Bless you, sir, apart from breaking a man's heart, that girl would break the Bank of England itself!"

Noel was furious at this.

"What have you to say against Miss Nellie Nicholson? You know she is one of the most delightful creatures in the world."

"Granted; but you see, I'm not in love with her, and *you* are. What I want to make you understand is, that the one thousand four hundred and fifty was advanced to you on her account, and that I don't intend to renew the bills; and if you don't pay me the money, I will put an execution into your lady-love's house; and if after that, she doesn't give you a piece of her mind, I'm a Dutchman!"

Noel could bear it no longer. His temper, for once in a way, got the better of him.

"Enough!" he cried, bringing his hand down with a bang on his desk. "Go to the devil, Monsieur Ducroe, and do as you like! I don't want your advice, and I don't want your company! I prefer, in future, to see your solicitors. I know that I have been imprudent, but I can repair all that in a manner that will rather astonish you. I could pay you the whole sum to-morrow, if it suited my convenience; but you see, my dear sir, it doesn't. Be wise—keep my affairs secret, and you'll get your money in the long run."

The usurer was puzzled.

"He's not so dipped as I thought," he mused. "He's found fresh fields and pastures new; but he won't hide them long from me. I'll ferret his secret out—I'll ferret it out!"

"Thus," continued the barrister, "take all my papers to your solicitors, and give them instructions to proceed against me. In eight days from this I shall receive a county court summons. I shall appear, and ask for time. You know the law well enough to know that. I'll get a month's grace, and a month is all I want. Now let us return to common sense. Accept a bill of exchange, payable in six weeks; or else do as you have threatened, and place the whole business in the hands of your solicitors."

"Well, well, I never was a hard man, and I don't want to be hard now. I agree to your proposition. Make out a bill for the one thousand four hundred and fifty, and I'll call for it on Monday, returning at the same time your bills."

"You don't happen to have them with you now?"

"No; and to tell you the truth—knowing how easy I am to be argued into a thing—I took the precaution of leaving them with my solicitors; but it's all right, you know—all right! I've given you my word—and my word is my bond! Good-bye—good-bye! I'll see you on Monday—I'll see you on Monday!"

Noel listened attentively to be quite sure that his crafty friend had left for good; and when he heard the hall door close, shook his fist in impotent rage.

"Scoundrel!" he cried. "Wretch! thief! old skin-fint! Didn't he dun into my ears, and no mistake! He had made up his mind to go to law, too, and that he would have settled me with the Count. Vile old usurer! At one time I was afraid I should have been forced to tell him all!"

He took out his watch as he spoke.

"Half-past five!"

He was undecided what to do. Ought he to dine with his father? Could he leave Madame Gerdy? The dinner at the De Valcourt mansion was a strong temptation; but on the other side there was a sick chamber, and the dying woman.

"Of course," he decided at last, "I can't go. It would be an outrage to all delicacy of feeling."

He sat down and wrote a few lines of excuse to his father, telling him that Madame Gerdy's death was momentarily expected, and that he could not find it in his heart to leave her bedside.

Whilst he gave the servant directions to send a messenger with the letter, a sudden thought struck him.

"Has your mistress's brother been informed of her dangerous illness?"

"I don't know, sir," answered the girl. "Anyhow, I've said nothing about it."

"Good heavens, what neglect! I felt sure that you had told him all about it. Go to him at once, and if he is not at home, find out where he is, and tell him to come directly."

Taking a book with him, Noel proceeded to the sick chamber, and seated himself in an arm-chair by the bedside. The lamp was lighted, and the Sister of Mercy came and went with noiseless footsteps, dusting, arranging, and putting things in order.

There was a happier look about her pale face, which did not escape Noel.

"Do you think that we may dare to hope, sister?" he asked.

"I think we may," she added. "The last remedies have taken admirably. The most important thing is that she must not be left alone, even for a moment. I have arranged with the maid-servant that when the doctor calls again that she is to take my place whilst I sleep, and at midnight I will relieve her."

"Don't disturb yourself, sister," interrupted Noel, sadly. "Sleep in peace until the morning. As for me, I will remain on guard all night."

CHAPTER XXXII.

ALTHOUGH, in military language, Old Corkscrew had been "repulsed with loss" by the magistrate, and terribly harrassed by the enemy, yet he wouldn't own himself beaten.

"I've only lost the scent," he repeated, sniffing the air in the way peculiar to him. "I've got my duty to do. Is this the time for me to give way, when the life of a man hangs upon a thread? If I don't stir myself, who will? I pushed this poor young man into the abyss, and I'll pull him out of it. Alone, too, I'll do it—that is, if no one will help me."

The poor old boy was nearly fainting with fatigue. The fresh air was a sort of tonic to him, and he remembered that since the night before he hadn't eaten a morsel. He dashed into the first restaurant he came to, and ordered a dinner, consisting of soup, chop to follow, with fried potatoes, pancake, and a pint of claret.

As he ate, his courage rose. Will any of us deny that it hasn't often been the case with ourselves? We sit down to a meal (however moderate) with one set of ideas, and when we rise they have changed their hues, just as the hues in a rainbow. There was a wit and a philosopher—his name we forget—who said that heroism simply depended upon the state of the stomach.

Our friend the Daddy left the restaurant a very different man from when he had entered it. The clouds were dissipated. Hadn't he time before him—a whole month? What can't a man in earnest do in a month? His only regret was that he couldn't warn Albert that he had a friend working for him, who was morally sure of his innocence.

The first thing he did on returning home was to mount to the fourth story, and ask for poor Madame Gerdy, the woman he had once intended to make his wife!

Noel opened the door.

This rather disconcerted the Daddy. He only meant "kind inquiries," and now he was obliged to enter, if only for five minutes.

The fact was, he distrusted himself, and would have paid down a five-pound note rather than have been dragged into a conversation about the Widow Lerouge. Besides he was nervously afraid that Noel—the future Viscount de Valcourt—might discover that he was connected with the detective police.

On the other hand, he was eager to learn what had passed between the young barrister and the old Count.

Noel beckoned his friend to follow him into Madame Gerdy's room.

"What does the doctor say?" asked Monsieur Tabaret, in that whispering voice which we instinctively use in the sick chamber.

"He has just left," answered Noel, "and gives no hope."

The old man, walking on tip-toe, advanced to the bed-side, and looked at the dying woman with eyes that were dim with tears.

"Poor thing! poor thing!" he murmured. "God has been very good in taking her away before she knows all! She has suffered much, but what would her sufferings have been could she have known that her son—her real son—was in prison under the awful charge of murder?"

"That's what I'm always saying," said Noel. "to console myself as I sit watching her by that bed. For I love her still, old friend. I can't forget that I have ever considered her as a mother. I know that I was on the point of cursing her once, but you stopped me. I thought I hated her; but now—now, when I am to lose her—I forget the wrong she has done me, and only remember her tenderness and devotion! Yes, death will be a blessed release for her; and yet why? for I believe that her son is innocent!"

"Not guilty, eh? And *you*, too, think so?"

Daddy Tabaret put so much warmth, so much vivacity into this exclamation, that Noel looked at him with stupefaction. The old man felt that he was blushing like a girl, and hastened to explain himself.

"I said, 'You think so, too?' What I meant by that was, that I coincided in your opinion. I, too, am convinced that he is innocent. It's so improbable that a young man, brought up as he has been, should have contemplated such a cowardly business. I've talked with a lot of people about it, and everybody agrees with me. The public is in his favor; and that's a great point gained."

Seated near the bed, far enough from the lamp to be still in the shadow, the Sister of Mercy was knitting away with astonishing rapidity at some woollen stockings destined for the poor. It was purely mechanical work, during which she prayed also in a mechanical way; but since the entrance of Daddy Tabaret she was all ears, and entirely forgot her everlasting *Te Deums*. She heard, yet did not understand. Her narrow brain worked harder than her knitting-needles.

What was the meaning of this conversation between these two men? Who could this sick woman be, and the young man who, calling her "mother" was still not her son, and who spoke of her *real* son as a murderer? She felt very uncomfortable; her small conscience

troubled her. Perhaps she was committing a sin in being in such a house. She drew her pale lips together, and made up her mind to listen to everything, and tell the priest "all about it," directly he arrived.

"No," said Noel—"no, Monsieur Tabaret. Albert hasn't the public with him as yet. As you know very well, the French go on an entirely different principle to the English. Here, when a poor devil is arrested—innocent, perhaps, of the crime imputed to him—we are all eager to throw stones at him. We reserve our pity for the guilty one, who, probably, will betray himself somewhere in his cross-examination. Whilst Justice is in doubt, we are with her, heart and soul, against her scapegoat; but the moment that it has been thoroughly proved that a man is an out-and-out scoundrel, we sympathize with him heart and soul. Now, that's what public opinion means in France. Albert is in prison; but as I told my father, the Count de Valcourt, I will undertake this case; I will defend him; and, with Heaven's help, I will save him."

The old man felt inclined to clasp his arms round his young friend's neck, but by a strong effort he restrained himself. "I'll tell him all about it by-and-by, if things take a wrong turn for the poor boy in prison."

He contented himself by shaking the barrister by the hand, as he rose to leave, saying, as he did so, "Bravo, my child!—you've got a good heart. I was afraid it might have been spoilt by the riches and grandeur that it is coming into. I know that your head is all right, but I confess I trembled about your heart. Thank goodness, it's in the right place! Good-night, my boy—good night."

Old Corkscrew closed the door softly behind him, and creeping down the stairs, endeavored to gain his own apartments with as little noise as possible.

The fact was, he was afraid to face his housekeeper. He had been twenty-four hours away from home, and naturally expected "a scene."

Marie was in a temper, and no mistake—"off her hinges," as she said; and intended to give her master warning on the spot, if he did not keep more regular hours.

All the night he had sat up shivering and shaking with fear, listening at the keyhole for every step she heard upon the stairs, and expecting each moment to see her master brought in upon a stretcher. To make matters worse, the whole house seemed to have gone mad. Nothing but running up and down stairs—one in search of the doctor, another for medicine—such "goings on" she couldn't stand; no respectable woman could; and if her master could spare her half an hour to-morrow, she'd give him a bit of her mind.

She burst out in reproaches whilst she laid the supper.

Old Corkscrew never answered a word; but the moment she had finished her own preparations and placed the wine on the table, he rose, and taking her by the shoulders, turned her out of the room, double locking the door behind her.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"PHEW!" muttered the old man; "if she had remained ten minutes' longer, I might have committed a desperate deed myself."

He had his work cut out for him that evening, and that was to arrange a new plan of action, and place it before the magistrate. Rapidly he analyzed his situation. Had he deceived himself in his investigations? No. His calculations as to probabilities, were they erroneous? No. He had started from a positive fact—namely, the murder itself—and all his provisions had been realized. Necessarily, therefore, he would find out the guilty man as he had already predicted—a man answering to every detail in the case he had made out. And this man, he felt positive, was *not* Albert de Valcourt.

"To the devil," he argued, speaking aloud in his intense earnestness, "with all your trite sayings and old-fashioned maxims! They are only the sign-posts that conduct fools and idiots on the road of life. Had I been left to my own inspirations, I would have dug deeper into this case, and not have floated on the surface. The old formula, 'Find out those who will profit by the crime,' may be sometimes as absurd as it is true. The inheritors of a murdered man gain, in reality all the profit by his death; whilst the murderer, at the very most, gets only the watch and purse of his victim. Three persons had an interest in the death of the Widow Lerogue—the Viscount Albert de Valcourt, Madame Gerdy, and the old Count de Valcourt. It has been proved to me that Albert isn't guilty. It can't be Madame Gerdy, for the sudden announcement of the murder has killed her. Therefore, there only remains the old Count himself. I'm awfully badgered!"

Here the Daddy commenced walking up and down the room, biting his nails to the very quick.

"If it's the Count, he must have hired somebody to do it—a broken-down swell, perhaps, because of the smart little boots, and the Trabucos, smoked with an amber-holder. Yet these broken-down swells generally fail in pluck. They can swindle and cheat, and all that sort of thing; but they seldom commit murder."

Here Old Corkscrew diversified his proceedings. He left off biting his nails, and began scratching his scanty hair, till the bald places between looked quite pink.

"No, I haven't got it yet!" he said, sinking into his old arm-chair in a sort of despair. "The young Viscount, it is true, can't account for his proceedings on that fatal evening. Now, I have nothing to do with that; the question I have to decide is, whether he was at the village of La Jonchere or not. It's all in a nutshell—and yet I cannot crack the nut!"

Again he sprang from his chair, and recommenced his tour round the room. At last he halted before the mirror over the mantle-piece, and surveyed his own face with an expression of extreme disgust.

"Well, ugly mug!" he said, apostrophizing himself;

"you haven't come out strong in this affair, and I shouldn't wonder if Gevrel won't beat you, after all!"

Gevrel—if our readers will refer to the first chapters of this story—was chief of the detective police; and he and our friend the Daddy differed entirely in their course of procedure concerning the murder of Widow Lerogue.

"Yes," continued Old Corkscrew, getting tearful at the thought; "Gevrel will win the game this time. And I hope he will; it would be only a proper punishment for my presumption and vanity. I have helped to condemn an innocent man! The half of my fortune, could I only liberate him, would be but a small sacrifice. And if I fail? If, after laboring so hard to do the evil, I find myself powerless to remedy the wrong I have done?" And Daddy Tabaret sunk back into his arm-chair, shivering at the thought his conscience had conjured up.

Poor old man! at all times an ardent worshiper of justice—indefatigable in his pursuit of the criminal—with the scent of the bloodhound and the persistency of the ferret—yet he had a heart full of charity for the suffering and the innocent; and in that category he now placed Albert de Valcourt.

Thread by thread had he, Tabaret, woven the web, strengthening it at all points, till the struggling fly was quite enmeshed; but now, how to undo the too efficient work he had—*he felt* he had—so wrongfully done?

That was the question.

It is easier to do than undo!

His victim—for so Daddy Tabaret began to consider the unfortunate Albert—has passed, so to speak, out of his hands into the remorseless, rarely-relaxing grasp of the law. The law, that dread power he had so often evoked to punish the guilty and relieve the oppressed—had now become in his eyes a terrible Moloch, destroying its victims, innocent or guilty, the moment they were pressed against its fiery breast.

That the murderer of the Widow Lerogue had yet to be discovered and denounced, and that an innocent man was about to be sacrificed through his means, he was but too painfully aware.

What was to be done?

The old man, tortured by a thousand conflicting thoughts, at last sought his bed, where he tossed and tumbled for many a dreary hour before, worn out with excitement and fatigue, he fell asleep.

And then Old Daddy Tabaret dreamed a dream.

He was in an immense crowd—a crowd with cruel faces, which were all, as moved by one impulse, turned fixedly one way.

A crowd without much noise, save the tramping of feet, and the hoarse fetching of breath as that of some vast multitude thirsty for blood!

Yes, for blood! for as poor Daddy Tabaret struggled with his dream, the faces of the crowd that was irresistibly beating him along would change. Now they would appear a pack of wolves—a herd of tigers—demons from the pit; but all and always thirsting for blood. At times, the crowd would come to a halt, and then—it seemed so in his dream—the eyes of all would turn on him, and an applauding murmur that made him shiver would break from a myriad of panting lips. "Why was he there?" the old man asked himself, as, half fainting, he was once more lifted from his feet and borne upward—onward by the mob.

What had he done, that creatures such as these should applaud him? Yet, at each halt, the same thing occurred, and Daddy Tabaret was the hero of the hour.

A sudden swinging backwards and forwards—a surging as of a mighty sea, and the great concourse of people comes to a sudden pause.

This time, to move on no further. What it has come to seek, it has found; and the purpose of that holiday is there; standing dark and dreadful against a melancholy sky.

The crowd gives one shout of satisfaction, then relapses into silence; while poor Daddy Tabaret, who has raised himself on tiptoe, the better to see, falls back half fainting, with a groan; he has recognized the headsmen's grim paraphernalia of death—the guillotine!

Again and again—with all the force that is left to him, he struggles to escape through the dense mass of human beings that hems him in. He even offers money, much money, to be allowed to pass; but in vain.

A voice coming from what lips he knows not, hisses in his ear, "Look up, thou hunter down of men!—look up, and behold your work! The man your beasted craft has selected—the victim your vanity has desired, is there, side by side with the executioner, an innocent man awaiting a shameful death! Look up, Daddy Tabaret—look up!"

And—for it was beyond his power to resist—the old thief-taker did look up, and uttered a great despairing cry; for there, with pinioned arms and head uncovered, stood Albert de Valcourt.

The priest was whispering resignation in his ear. the executioner was preparing to perform his terrible office, when another strange movement came over the gazing multitude.

Suddenly it parted, rolling back in two black waves, to leave a passage free—an open space, to be occupied by one man only; and that man was Tabaret.

It was then the young man on the scaffold advanced a few steps, and, looking down, fixed his haggard eyes upon the now livid, trembling old man.

By a gigantic effort, the cords confining his arms were burst asunder; and, raising one hand, Albert de Valcourt pointed downwards, with outstretched finger, and at him.

"I die innocent!" he exclaimed in a voice of thunder; "and that man is my assassin! By his cruel arts have I been brought here. Let him too, mount the fatal ladder, and take his place beside me."

Then, as in his dream it seemed to the wretched old man, no voice of approval was now heard in the crowd; but on the contrary, hands were clenched menacingly,

and the whole atmosphere was impregnated with a curse.

The mob again closed in, hurrying Tabaret up to the very foot of the scaffold; nay, even up several rounds of the ladder, that he might the better regard his work.

The voice of Albert de Valcourt once more, and for the last time, dominated the crowd; while his eyes—those dreadful, sad, accusing eyes—had never once left the eyes of Tabaret.

"I am innocent," he said, "even of the thought of this terrible crime, but the guilty man I know? His name is"—

Oh, how the old man struggled to hear!—how every sense was strained to catch the words! He even clung to the steps of the ladder, and strove to mount; but in vain.

A name was uttered, and heard by all but—Tabaret.

"The name, the name!" he cried, his voice rising into a frantic scream; "and let me undo the evil that I have done!"

Despair gave the old man a sort of superhuman energy. He climbed the ladder, and stood upon the scaffold, to shrink back, awe-struck, into the pitying arms of the priest.

The horrid work was done. The executioner, according to the hideous custom of his office, had raised the severed head, and turned the angry face towards him. Was it fancy? The eyes again opened, but the lips uttered no sound; and as Daddy Tabaret met that reproachful gaze, he threw up his arms in a gesture of agonized entreaty, and—awoke with a scream!

"Oh, what a dream!" moaned the old man. "Oh, what an awful dream!" He wiped the clammy perspiration from his forehead, then clasped his hands in prayer. "With heaven's help," he said, "I will yet find out the man, and Albert de Valcourt shall be saved!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MONSIEUR DABURON, the magistrate, had his work before him, and passed all Saturday and Sunday examining witnesses, from the village where the murder had been committed, and its nearest town, Bougival.

Whilst he snatched a half hour or so for his meals, he had audiences with the various agents of the detective force, whose investigations, however, were anything but satisfactory.

They had heard a great deal of talk about a woman, who asserted that she had seen the murderer coming out of the widow's cottage, but nobody seemed able to give them a description of this mythical woman, or even to furnish them with her name.

But they all thought it their duty to inform the magistrate that an inquiry was being conducted, by "a private individual," at the same time as theirs. This person was sparing no end of money, and had about a dozen men under him, who were always coming across them, and forestalling them in everything.

The magistrate looked somewhat startled.

"You have, of course, discovered who the party was?"

"Old Corkscrew, of course, who was a-sniffing and a-prying about the place, in an old gig, harnessed to a young bay mare, as knew what work meant, and no mistake. He must have got up very early in the morning," said the disconsolate detective; for wherever we went, we found he'd been there afore us. I met the old beggar once, and he had the impudence to speak to me. 'What,' says he, 'do you mean by showing them photographs about?' Before the end of the week, you'll be crowded with witnesses, who, for a five-franc piece, will dye their hair and beards to any tint, pull out their teeth, and even maim themselves, to suit whatever portrait you may present them.' He called another of our fellows, who was passing him on the high-road, and made a sign at him. 'What a fool you are,' he cried out, 'to waste your time in seeking a man who has left the high-road, and is now skulking in the byways!' At last, he finished off by telling two of the police-agents, who happened to be in a wine-shop in the village, that he had spotted his man. Three persons had seen him—two railway guards, and a third person, a woman whose evidence would be decisive; for she had spoken to him, and she remembered quite well that he was smoking."

Monsieur Daburon lost his temper on the spot.

"The officious old idiot!" he muttered between his teeth. "Here! get me my hat and great coat! I'll start for Bougival to-night, and I'll bring him back, with a flea in his ear!"

The journey was useless, Daddy Tabaret, the gig, the swift bay mare, and the twelve men had vanished.

On returning home, tired and dispirited, the magistrate found a telegram on his table, from the chief of the detective force.

It contained these few words:

"We have found the man. Leave for Paris this evening. Valuable evidence."

"GEVROL."

At nine the next morning, Monsieur Daburon was preparing to start for the Palace of Justice, where he expected to meet Gevrol and the man he had entrapped—perhaps also the meddling Old Corkscrew himself.

He had collected his papers, put on his coat and hat, when his servant informed him that a young lady, accompanied by an old woman, requested to see him.

She wouldn't give her name, saying that it was entirely unnecessary, as it was absolutely imperative that the magistrate should spare her a few minutes of his time.

"Show her up!" said Monsieur Daburon.

He thought it was probably some relation of a prisoner whose case he had undertaken previous to the murder

at La Jonchère, and made up his mind to dismiss the unwelcome visitor as soon as possible.

He was standing before the chimney-place, with his back to the door, looking over some letters.

The noise of the opening door, the rustle of a silk dress, and the sound of a light footstep behind him, did not disconcert him in the least.

He didn't even turn his head. When he had finished reading the letter he had in his hand, he condescended to lift his eyes and cast a rapid glance at the newcomer.

He started back, as though he had seen a ghost. The letters fell from his nerveless grasp into the fender at his feet.

"Clare!" he gasped. "Clare!"

And then—as if he believed himself, and hoped to believe himself, the plaything of some illusion of the brain, and yearned to see the embodiment of her whose name he had uttered—he turned slowly, and leaned heavily against the chimney-place.

Yes, it was Clare!

What? This young girl, at once so proud and yet so shy, had summoned up sufficient courage to call upon him, *alone*?—for she had left her old governess outside. Monsieur Daburon felt puzzled. Some great sentiment or powerful motive had annihilated her natural timidity and aristocratic reserve.

Despite himself, his heart gave a great throb of happiness. He knew she was lost to him, but he loved her still! It was such an exquisite luxury to look on her sweet face again!

He said nothing; only looked at her with a wistful gaze, almost sad in its intense affection.

He thought her more beautiful than ever. Her sweet, pale face, and large dreamy eyes, usually veiled in a melancholy that was habitual to them, now flashed, and gleamed, like a summer-sky that threatens storm.

He felt that she had made up her mind about something; and whatever that something was, that she would carry out her resolution with all the noble resolution that belongs to simplicity and truth.

She advanced towards him with a quiet dignity, extending her hand in a pretty friendly way, that some women do with a grace that is intuitive.

"We are still friends, are we not?" she said, with a tremulous smile.

The magistrate felt like a great awkward schoolboy. He looked at the little white, ungloved hand, and only touched it with the tips of his fingers.

"Friends, of course," he murmured. "You know that I am devoted to you."

Mademoiselle d'Arange subsided gently into a vast arm-chair—the very same arm-chair that Old Corkscrew, only two nights before, had argued the guilt, and succeeded in effecting the arrest of Albert.

Monsieur Daburon remained standing, leaning against the chimney-piece.

"You know why I have come?" asked the girl.

With a bend of the head, he made a sign which meant "Yes."

He was battling with himself. Could he resist her? Could he refuse supplications when they came from such a mouth?

"It was only yesterday that I knew all about it," continued Clare; they kept it from me; without my dear old governess, I wouldn't have known it even now. Oh, what a night I have passed! I was quite overwhelmed at first; but directly I heard that it was you who were directing all inquiries, my fears were dissipated." Then she added, in a tone of confidence, "You'll get him off, of course?"

The magistrate was silent. He half-admired, half-pitied her girlish simplicity—her pure faith, that doubted nothing.

"And if I tell you, Mademoiselle d'Arange," he commenced, "that the Viscount is not innocent?"

She half rose, with a gesture of protestation.

"If I tell you that he is guilty?"

Clare looked at the magistrate in wide-eyed wonder. Had she understood him rightly, or had the sorrow of the last day or two dazed and stupefied her? Everything of the most impossible and improbable sort seemed natural now, after those last terrible words of his.

He, not daring to raise his eyes, went on speaking, in a voice that trembled slightly, but that increased in strength as he went on.

"I cannot tell you what I feel in speaking to you now; but, cruel as it may seem, I still feel it is my duty to tell you the bitter truth. Muster up, then, all the courage that I know you possess, and meet with noble firmness the greatest misfortune that can fall upon a true-hearted woman. *The man you love is guilty!*"

Like a physician who pours out a dangerous medicine—calculating it drop by drop—Monsieur Daburon pronounced slowly, word by word, his last sentence.

He watched her out of the corner of his eye, expecting, in prison language, that she would "break out," or faint, or scream.

He was entirely out in his calculations. She did nothing of the kind.

She rose, as if galvanized, strong in her youth and energy; her usually pale and delicate face crimson with excitement; and her beautiful eyes, that had before been dim with tears, sparkling with righteous indignation.

"It is false?" she cried; "and those who have put such an idea into your head have lied! I can't mince words now, because I *know* I am speaking the truth! I know Albert—I know that it is impossible for him to do a cruel or an underhand action! Were he in this room at this very moment," she said, vehemently, stretching out her arms towards the magistrate, "and were he on his knees before me, confessing his guilt, I would push him back, and tell him he was dreaming!"

"He hasn't confessed yet," said the magistrate,

greatly upset, and wiping his moist forehead with his still moist hand. "It doesn't matter whether he does or not—the evidence against him is as clear as the noonday sun! Facts are stubborn things, Mademoiselle d'Arange."

"I deny that they are," said Clare, now thoroughly at bay. "I repeat—nay, I swear to you!—that Justice is entirely on the wrong tack this time! 'Yes!' she insisted, with a little stamp of her foot, catching a gesture of pity on the part of her listener: 'I am as sure of it as I see you have made up your mind to the contrary! I know Albert better than he knows himself!'"

Monsieur Daburon was about to make a timid objection; but she waved him impatiently aside.

"It is now four years that we have loved each other. Since that time I have had no thought that has been hidden from him, and—yes, I will answer it before Heaven—he has had no secret from me. Alas! he was, as I am, alone in the world. His father never loved him—oh, never! and it was for that reason, I suppose, feeling our loneliness in the world, that we trusted so much and clung so close together. We had but one heart, or, rather, two hearts that beat as one. And will you tell me that Albert is criminal—that a soul, which I know to be as pure as an angel's, is sullied and stained by so base a crime as *murder*?"

"Desperate positions have long ere now driven better men, or as good men as"—he hesitated a moment what name to call him, then added—"as this one, to do cruel and desperate acts. Suddenly he finds that neither the name or the fortune of the De Valcourts belong to him. This secret—this terrible secret, which was to hurl him from the topmost round of Fortune's ladder, to be spurned and trampled on in the mud, was known to but one person—but *one*, an old woman!"

The girl was listening to him with dilated eyes. He fancied he could almost hear the beating of her heart.

"This woman," he went on, "held his fate in her hands. His hope of a union with you, everything that youth and ambition could desire, was hanging upon an incautious word—a spiteful breath. To keep all, he dared all, found out this woman, and *killed her!*"

"What an infamous calumny!" cried Clare. "As shameful as it is stupid! Why, he has already told me this 'terrible secret' you speak of about his fallen fortunes. He told it to me the very day he knew it himself. He didn't think of his own position; he only thought of me. He was broken-hearted at the thought that I might grieve and fret—that the golden future his love had made for me was now mere dust and ashes. I grieve and fret! What was his grand name and great fortune to me? I owed to them the only real sorrow I had ever known; and so I told him. He became quite happy after that, and said that as long as I loved him, he cared for nothing else. Then I gave him a severe scolding for having ever doubted me. Then we made it up, and were so happy; and after that he left me, and cruelly murdered a poor old woman! The idea is preposterous! I'm sure you will never dare to repeat it!"

Mademoiselle d'Arange stopped, with a smile upon her lips.

This smile signified, "At last I have convinced him—at last I have gained the victory. And he hasn't a word to say in reply."

"You are perhaps unaware," said the magistrate, shaking his head sadly, "that sudden fits of frenzy will drive the best of men to deeds of the most fearful ferocity. How can you tell that, after leaving you, whether a feeling of despair, approaching madness, did not make his reason totter and render him unaccountable for his actions? This is the only way that I can explain the crime."

The face of Clare became ashen pale.

"Mad! he must, then, have been mad!" she murmured, with a look of intense terror.

"Perhaps," answered the magistrate. "And yet all the circumstances of the crime denote the most careful and subtle premeditation." Then seeing the agonized expression of her brow and eyes, he changed his tone of cold analysis to one of entreaty. "Oh, Clare!—if you will let me call you so—listen to me. I'm a man of the world—you are a mere child, inexperienced in its ways. You have lost your father and your mother. You told me once you looked upon me as a sort of elder brother; listen to me, then, for I speak to you in all the sincerity of a pure and unselfish affection; give up this man; he is unworthy of your love. I know that this sorrow will go right to break your heart. The ordeal that you will have to go through is a terrible one. It would kill an ordinary woman; but you are not an ordinary woman. You are young—you are strong—you are brave. You have a bright life before you yet. In the time to come, you will look back upon this portion of your life as upon some dreadful dream, and thank Heaven that you were awakened from it!"

He spoke with passion and deep sincerity; but she didn't understand a word he said. She heard his voice; but the *meaning* of the words he uttered entirely escaped her. She felt confused—dazed—and utterly miserable!

"I don't quite comprehend your meaning," she said, after a pause, pressing her burning hand to her aching forehead. "What is it you advise me to do?"

"I advise you to wipe all memory of Albert de Valcourt from your heart. Pray on your knees every night forgetfulness for a love that was thrown away. In the eyes of the world, by the verdict of his judges, this young man is guilty. Perhaps, for certain considerations, his sentence may be commuted; but the moral effect will be the same. The stain of blood is upon him—that, nothing can wash away. Try to bear it, Clare, and close your heart against him forever!"

The young girl stopped Monsieur Daburon, with a look of almost savage anger.

"So I am to understand," she cried, in a voice that trembled with passion, "that you counsel me to desert him in his misfortune! All the world is against

him, and you prudently advise me to follow its example! Men do these selfish things. I have been told, women never! Look around you—however unfortunate, however humiliated, however fallen a man may be, you will always find some true-hearted woman near to console and sustain him; when the last of his friends sneak off—when the last of his relations have turned their backs on him—still the woman remains!"

The magistrate felt that he had gone too far. The excitement of Clare frightened him. He tried, but in vain, to interrupt her enthusiasm.

"I may be timid," she went on, "but I never was a coward! I chose Albert of my own free will, and, come what will, I won't renounce him! He would have shared with me his prosperity and his glory! I will take, whether he likes it or not, the half of his shame and misery! You counsel me to forget—teach me first where forgetfulness is to be found! I forget him! I couldn't do it, even if I wished; and I don't wish. I love him still! Nothing shall separate us—nothing but death! And if he is to die on the scaffold, I know I shall die from the same blow that strikes him!"

Monsieur Daburon had hidden his face in his hands. He couldn't bear her to see the deep emotion he felt.

"How she loves him!" he thought—"how she loves him!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

The deathless silence that reigned through the room recalled the magistrate to his senses.

Clare had fallen into an arm-chair. Her eyes were closed, and through the pale, parted lips the breath came quickly. He thought she was on the point of fainting. He stretched his arm out eagerly towards the bell that was on his desk, and was just about to strike it, when, by a quick movement, she stopped him.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I thought you were ill," he stammered. "I was intending to call your governess."

"Oh, it's nothing!" she said, smiling, "I'm only a little upset; that's all. I don't look strong, you know. People think I'm very delicate, because I am so pale; but I *am* strong. I'm full of nerve, and I can stand a great deal; much more than your fat, chubby-cheeked girls do! What I feel the hardest to bear is, that I should be forced to make the confessions I have just made. I feel degraded in my own estimation. A man like Albert de Valcourt requires no defender; he only requires you to *prove* his innocence."

She rose as she spoke, and advanced to the door. Monsieur Daburon stopped her by a gesture.

The fact was, to use a common phrase, he had lost his head. In his aberration, he had thought it his duty to tell the poor girl the whole truth, and thus destroy all the false hopes she had conjured up. A surgeon (he argued to himself), who has commenced a terrible operation, doesn't leave it unfinished because his patient screams, kicks and cries.

"It is extremely painful for me, Mademoiselle d'Arange"—he commenced, but she cut him short.

"You have said quite enough, sir; any further remarks from you will be quite thrown away upon me! If you were really my friend, I would have asked you to have helped me in saving a poor forlorn and shipwrecked brother; but I see you are too busy—you have doubtless a score of other shipwrecked wretches to attend to. Good-bye!"

The magistrate turned crimson. He felt very angry at this last insult.

He remembered a remark of Old Corkscrew's relative to the fairer sex, a remark which came back to him in full force, as he looked at Clare's beautiful, sensitive face.

"Women," he said, "seldom analyze, or reason about a thing. They only feel and believe—instead of disputing, they affirm."

And this was the case with Clare.

Again he stopped her departure; this time by laying his hand upon her arm.

"Stay, for one moment!"

She turned, and leaning her back against the door, stood listening.

"If you knew the undoubted proofs that I have in my hands," he said, in those cold, concentrated tones, which announced that whatever provocation she might give him, he was determined not to lose his temper—"if you will allow me even to mention a few of them, I am certain that the false hopes that you are weaving will fade away into thin air."

"Speak, then!" said Clare, imperiously.

"You have given me leave; mind, you must not blame me afterwards, if I pain you now," he commenced, nervously.

"Go on!" said the girl, with an impatient stamp of her foot.

"Well, amongst the thousand and one proofs we have against the accused, there is a special one, which, to my mind, is decisive. The murder was committed on the evening of Shrove Tuesday and he absolutely refuses, or rather pretends to forget, how he passed his time during that evening. He was absent from home, however, and did not return till two in the morning; his clothes were spotted with mud, and torn in various places; whilst his gloves were scratched and split, as though he had been engaged in some fight or struggle."

"Oh, stop, stop!" cried Clare, breathlessly, her eyes beaming with a sudden gleam of joy. "You said, I think, that it was the evening of Shrove Tuesday?"

"I did."

"Oh, I knew I was right! Didn't I tell you he was innocent?"

She clasped her hands as she spoke, and then raised her eyes, as in prayer.

The expression of the most fervent devotion and faith, caught by some of the Italian painters, radiated her pale and lovely face, whilst she thus stood, in a

sort of ecstasy, rendering thanks to God, in the overwhelming effusion of her gratitude.

The magistrate was so thoroughly put out, that he forgot to admire the pretty picture before him.

"Well?" he said, impatiently waiting an explanation. "Monsieur Daburon," answered Clare, "if that is your strongest proof, it exists no longer. *Albert de Valcourt spent the whole of the evening you mention as the proof!*"

"With you?" stammered the magistrate.

"Yes; with me."

He was astonished—almost stunned.

"What!" he asked; "the Viscount spent the evening at your house? Your aunt—your governess—the servants spoke to, and saw him?"

"No; he came, and went, in secret. He wished that no one should see him. He wanted to be alone with me."

"Ah!" said the magistrate, with a sigh of relief.

This sign signified, "I understand it all now. It beats everything I've come across! She intends to sacrifice her reputation, in order to save him. Poor child! poor child!"

This sigh was, however, interpreted in quite a different way by Mademoiselle d'Arlange. She thought that Monsieur Daburon was surprised and shocked at her seeing Albert without witnesses.

"Your surprise is an insult!" she said.

"Mademoiselle d'Arlange!"

"A girl of my blood and education, can receive her betrothed lover without even a whisper being raised against her, unless she so far degrades herself as to have to blush that such an interview should have taken place at all!"

These were the words she said, but at the same time she was crimson with shame, with grief and rage.

If a look could annihilate a man, the unfortunate Monsieur Daburon would have been annihilated on the spot.

"I didn't intend to insult you, mademoiselle," he said, quite humbly. "I only meant that I couldn't quite understand why the Viscount should visit you in secret, when his approaching marriage gave him the right to come and go in the most public manner, at all hours and at all times. I want to know, also, how he got himself into such a dilapidated condition on this particular visit in question; I should like to show you the condition of his clothes, for instance!"

Clare was more indignant than ever.

"This man doubts my word," she said.

The sneer and the tone of her voice annoyed her listener.

How dare she speak thus? Did she think she was going to make him her dupe?

"Once and for all, Mademoiselle d'Arlange," he said, sternly, "I must remind you that you are speaking to a man who has his duty to fulfill in the eyes of the law. A crime has been committed, and all the evidence I have collected tends to prove that the Viscount Albert de Valcourt is the guilty man. You come here, and tell me that he is innocent—all I ask of you is to prove it."

"I have given you my word!"

"Prove it!"

The girl raised her head and advanced towards him slowly, with eyes full of pained astonishment.

"Is it possible, then, that it would be a pleasure to you to find Albert guilty? Would you feel a gratification in condemning him? Do you hate him? Remember, his fate is in your hands! What about your impartiality? Certain memories come back to me—how will they tell against you? Are you sure that in persecuting this man you are not revenging yourself upon a rival, whilst you hide behind the shield of the law?"

"Oh, Clare! Clare!" said the magistrate, his face quivering under the nervous pain he suffered; "it is in your power to wound—it is not in mine to answer!"

"But you must answer! You represent the law!"

She saw the emotion in the magistrate's face, and her tone softened, for there was no doubting the genuineness of his tears. "You will help me?" she said, extending two imploring hands. "May I trust in you?"

It was by an effort, yet with the firmness of a man resolved, that he answered:

"You may trust me."

Then, with clasped hands and streaming eyes, Clare told the strange tale that was to prove the innocence of her lover, Albert de Valcourt.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"You know," commenced Clare, "that there have always been great obstacles in the way of my marriage with Albert?"

Monsieur Daburon nodded in sign of acquiescence.

"I wonder what new fable she is about to invent," he thought. "The fact is, she is so devoted to this man that she's capable of saying she committed the murder herself."

"The old Count de Valcourt," she continued, "quite disapproved of the match, because I had no dowry. He's such an ambitious old man that he would pile riches upon riches simply to keep up the stately grandeur of the family name. It took five years for Albert to bring his father to his way of thinking; but at last he triumphed over his scruples, and obtained his consent."

"Oh! he gave his consent, did he?" said the magistrate, with a sigh, looking wistfully into the earnest eyes and the sweet, flushed face.

"Yes, he gave his consent; but my grandmother was much hurt at the long delay. You know how proud she is; and I think this time she was right. She was dreadfully hurt, considering that our family dates further back than that of the De Valcourts, at the slights that had been put upon her, only because our account at the bankers' was less than theirs, and we had lost our landed estates. Although the day was fixed, my grand-

mother declared that the strictest etiquette should be observed until we were married. You know her way?"

Monsieur Daburon nodded. He did not dare to trust his voice, for fear it should sound bitter. He knew the old lady. He had been snubbed by her, and had not relished it.

"Grandmamma is very proud, you know, and she hates to be placed in a false position. People might think," she argued, "that I had set a trap for this young man with his immense wealth and distinguished position, therefore she decided that we were only to meet once a week, and then in the presence of her friends and acquaintances. We felt this to be rather hard; but grandmamma was obdurate, so we were obliged to give in. Such was the position of affairs, when one Sunday morning I received a little note from Albert, telling me that important business would prevent him accepting my grandmother's invitation for that day. I had a presentiment that some misfortune had happened. I never slept that night. I awaited the morrow with impatience—with anguish. At last, instead of coming himself, he sent his servant with a letter. In this letter Albert implored me to grant him an interview. It was necessary, he said, that he should speak to me alone, and without delay. Our future depended upon it. I didn't hesitate a moment. I wrote in reply that he would find me at the garden-door that opened upon a little by-street at the back of our house. I told him to come on Tuesday evening, and to knock three times as the clock struck nine from the Hospital of the Invalides. I knew my grandmother expected some friends that night, and I thought that in feigning a headache I might be allowed to retire at an early hour. I also knew that my governess, owing to her great capacities as a whist player, would be retained by some gray-headed old partner, thus leaving me to fulfill my engagement."

"Pardon me for interrupting you," put in Monsieur Daburon. "What day did you write to the Viscount?"

"On Tuesday."

"Can you tell me at what hour?"

"I think I sent the letter somewhere between two and three o'clock."

"Thank you. Pray go on."

"Everything took place exactly as I had foreseen," continued Clare. "In the evening I found myself alone—unwatched. In the drawing-room they were absorbed in music and cards; in the servants' offices the preparations for supper were engrossing the minds of our housekeeper and her maids. Down I crept to the garden a little before the time fixed. I had succeeded in finding the key to the garden-door, and I set to work at once to open it. But the key wouldn't turn in the lock, which was encrusted with dirt and rust. I blew into it—rubbed it with my pocket handkerchief—and then used all my strength to give the key a turn. I gave it up in desperation when nine o'clock struck, and Albert knocked. Through a chink in the panel I told him all about it, and he at once advised my throwing the key over the wall, for him to have a try—as, of course, his hands were stronger than mine. Try as he might, he didn't succeed a bit better than I had done, and so I implored him to put off our interview until the morrow. He wouldn't hear of it—what he had to tell me admitted of no delay. For three long days he had hesitated about telling me; but he felt he couldn't keep it from me any longer. He said, if he didn't tell me, he felt he should go mad, or do something worse—perhaps, make away with himself. We were talking all this time through the chink I told you about. At last, he got so impatient, that he proposed climbing the wall. I implored him not to attempt it. The wall, as you know, is a very high one, and the coping is covered with broken glass, and the branches of the acacias make quite a hedge upon it. But he only laughed at my fears, and said, that unless I gave him express orders to the contrary, he'd be over in a minute. Before I could make up my mind, he had accomplished the feat, and descended, without a scratch or a bruise, into the garden. The news he had to break to me was the dreadful catastrophe that had fallen upon him. We sat on the bench in front of the shrubbery; but when the rain commenced, we went for shelter into the summer-house. Midnight had struck when Albert went away, calmer in mind, and almost happy in spirits. He left by the same way he had entered—only with less difficulty, because I persuaded him to use the gardener's ladder, which I lowered after he had gone."

This story, told in the simplest and most natural way possible, astounded Monsieur Daburon. He did not know what to think.

"One question more, Mademoiselle d'Arlange," he said. "Had the rain commenced when the Viscount climbed the wall?"

"No; the first drops fell, as I told you, when we were seated near the shrubbery. I remember it well, because he opened his umbrella, and I remarked to him that we looked like Paul and Virginia."

"Grant me a few minutes longer," said the magistrate; and, as he spoke, he sat down at his desk, and rapidly wrote two letters.

The first contained an order that Albert should be brought, without delay, to the Palace of Justice.

The second was more minute. It contained instructions to the superintendent to proceed immediately to the Faubourg St. Germain, and examine the wall, at the end of the garden, belonging to the mansion of the Duchess d'Arlange. It explained that the wall had been twice scaled, and the traces of coming and going would naturally be different, especially as to the foot-prints.

Whilst writing, the magistrate had struck upon a bell for his servant.

"Here are two letters. Take them to the superintendent, and ask him to attend to them at once. There, be off! Take a cab, and don't lose an instant. Stop! if you can't find the superintendent, inquire where he is

—he can't be far off—and tell him to see about this business, without delay."

Then, turning to Clare, he asked, "Have you kept the letter in which the Viscount asked you to meet him?"

"Yes; I think I have it in my pocket. Here it is!"

And she handed him a very crumpled piece of paper.

Asuspicion flashed across his mind. This compromising letter was very conveniently at hand. "Young ladies," he thought, "don't usually carry about missives of this sort." At a glance, he read the few lines the letter contained. "No date," he murmured; "no address; not even an envelope!"

Clare was too pre-occupied to hear him. She was trying if she could find some means to prove that the interview between her lover and herself had really taken place.

"Monsieur Daburon," she said, abruptly breaking a long silence, "an idea has just struck me. Very often, when we think ourselves most alone, is the very time that we are being watched. Now, I took every precaution that my meeting with Albert should be known only to ourselves; but somebody might have seen us, you know. Suppose you summon all the servants?"

"What?" blurted out the magistrate; "compromise yourself to your servants? You must be raving!"

"What?" she said, opening her lovely eyes in wonder; "you talk to me of my reputation? I don't care one bit about it, as long as he is free!"

In spite of himself, the magistrate could not help admiring her noble self-devotion.

"And, then, the key," she went on; "you remember about the key I threw over the wall to Albert? He didn't return it to me. Perhaps he put it into his pocket; and, if you find it in his possession, won't that prove he was in the garden on Tuesday night?"

"I will make a note of it."

"I've another idea," said Clare. "Send some of your people to examine the wall."

She was quite excited now, and was walking up and down the room, puckering her fair, broad brow into unaccustomed wrinkles in search of "ways and means."

"It has been already done," answered Monsieur Daburon. "One of those letters just sent contained orders for an inquisition to be made at your house—a private inquisition, of course."

"Oh, thanks!—a thousand thanks!" And for the second time she extended him her hand. "I see that at last you intend to help us! Another idea occurs to me. I also wrote to Albert on Tuesday. Ask him for my letter—that will be evidence, won't it?"

"He has burnt it."

Clare lowered her eyes, and the bright flush faded out of her face.

She thought she detected a certain irony in the magistrate's voice. In this she was mistaken. He was thinking of the letter Albert had thrown into the fire. It must have been concerning this very letter that he had used the words, "*She cannot resist me.*"

"Don't you think it would have been better, mademoiselle," he said, after a pause, "if the Viscount had told me all this at first, and so have avoided painful scandal and useless inquiry?"

The girl raised her head proudly.

"It seems to me that a man who really loved and respected a woman would hardly own—unless he had received her consent—that she had granted him a private interview. A man ought rather to die than betray the honor of a woman!"

To use a slang phrase, the magistrate was "shut up."

"I have still one more favor to ask you," he said, meekly. "It's a mere formality, but a painful one—that is, that you will repeat all that you have told me before a witness, and then sign your deposition."

She didn't feel it in the least painful—she was only too delighted.

"I know," she went on, with a deep sigh, "that I shall be dreadfully talked about, and be perhaps laughed at as a sentimental girl, whose head has been turned by sensation novels; but I don't care for the world's praise or blame as long as I am sure of his love!"

Now the magistrate envied the prisoner in his narrow cell—glorified by the devotion of such a girl.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A PRETTY time of it Clare's governess had, as she sat beside her pupil in the brougham, after leaving the Palace of Justice.

Clare was evidently not satisfied with her visit. She quite forgot the presence of the old lady by her side; and although she had kissed her in a fierce sort of way on entering, and taken one of her hands in hers, to the imminent peril of the glove that enclosed it, she never looked at her, though she still held her hand, and spoke, as it were, at random.

"What a miserable, useless being I am!" she said. "He is suffering and in prison; I am free, and can do what I like, and yet I can't help him. Oh, heaven!" she sobbed, bending down on the hand she held in hers, the fingers of which clasped her own in silent sympathy; "help me now! Inspire my lips with words to touch the hearts of these hard-hearted men! Oh! what shall I do?—what shall I do?"

"Clare! Clare! calm yourself. You'll have such a headache to-morrow!" said the quiet voice of the governess.

But Clare did not hear her.

"To whom shall I go next?" she went on; "at whose feet shall I throw myself to obtain his pardon?"

She stopped, as if shocked at the words she had uttered; and, to the great relief of her companion, flung the hand she had so long held in custody contemptuously aside.

"I'm not worthy of him after all! I said his pardon, as he is innocent, it would be a degradation for me to

ask it. Oh! if I could find some one to help—but I am only a weak, inexperienced girl! If I could have the advice and assistance of a man of the world!" She paused, as if reflecting. Then said, turning to her governess, "Yes; there is a man who owes something to Albert, and who has indirectly placed him in the present position!"

"The Count Lionel de Valcourt!"

"Yes; his father. Surely, he will not desert him now. I will go to him, and remind him that he has still a son!"

Half an hour afterwards, Clare was seated in the old Count's study; and, ten minutes afterwards, she had placed him in possession of the facts she had already narrated to the magistrate.

Since the arrest of Albert the Count had remained plunged in a sort of gloomy stupor. In his profound grief, seeing nothing around him but ruin and disgrace, he had not made the slightest effort to throw off the torpor that clouded his brain. This man, ordinarily so active, so full of passion and energy, was stupefied, and felt his mental paralysis rather a relief than otherwise, as it prevented him from realizing the intensity of his sorrow.

The voice of Clare sounded like the clarion of hope in his ear. The darkness of the fearful night rolled away, and he saw the light of dawn in the sky.

The Count took between his hands the small, soft hands of Clare, and pressed them with a paternal tenderness.

"You are a brave girl!" he exclaimed; "a noble, courageous girl! Good blood will never lie! I didn't know you, my child, but I understand you now. Yes; you shall be my daughter; and you will be happy—happy in the love of Albert, as he will be in possessing that precious treasure—a true woman's heart! But we mustn't run wild and cackle like geese upon a common, my dear; we must get good legal advice. Ah! I have it—Noel!"

Clare raised her eyes to the old Count's face in wonder.

"Noel is my son," he said, falteringly; "my other son, Albert's brother. He has a great reputation as a barrister; he will help us with his advice."

The name of Noel, thrown like a bombshell into the midst of their hopeful talk, went like a dagger to Clare's heart.

The Count saw the sudden pallor and the pained start.

"Don't be uneasy, my dear," he went on—"don't be uneasy. Noel is a good and conscientious man, and, what's more, he loves Albert. Don't shake your head, little skeptic. Noel told me himself, in this very room, that he was morally convinced of Albert's innocence; he declared that he would employ his whole intellect and energy to clear away a fatal mistake, and that if I would give him permission he would undertake the case."

These affirmations, however, hardly seemed to reassure the young girl. "What, after all, has this Noel done for Albert as yet?" she thought; but she wisely kept this reflection to herself.

"We'll send for him," continued the Count. "He is now beside the bedside of Albert's mother, who brought him up from his infancy, and who is now dying!"

"Albert's mother?"

"Yes, my child. Albert will explain to you what must now seem an enigma. Remember, if we wish to save Albert, how time flies."

He stopped speaking; a sudden thought struck him. Instead of sending for Noel, why not go to him? He would then have an opportunity of seeing Valerie, and for years he had so longed to meet her again!

There are steps in this life to which we are impelled by a feeling of the heart alone, and which we hardly dare to risk, because a thousand subtle or interested reasons cause us to pause and think. We wish—long, with an ardent longing, and yet we struggle and fight with them. At last an opportunity occurs, when we throw all our scruples to the winds, and rush to meet them with a sort of delirious joy. And then the excuse we generally make is, "It was not I that willed it—it was Fate!"

"It would certainly save time," observed the Count, "if we call on Noel."

"Certainly; let us go at once," said Clare, promptly.

"But—but," hesitated the old nobleman, "would it be right—I mean would it be proper for you to accompany me? Etiquette, you know."

"Propriety and etiquette!" echoed Clare, impetuously; "don't think of them at such a time as this. With you and with Albert I can go anywhere. Isn't my evidence of importance? You will never be able to get on without me—do take me! don't leave me behind!"

This she said pleadingly.

"You shall come," said the Count, giving the bell-rope a pull that nearly brought it down. "The carriage!" he said to his servant; "and lose no time."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AIDED by the instructions of Daddy Tabaret's porter, the Count and the young girl mounted the stairs to Madame Gerdy's suite of apartments.

The Count ascended very slowly, leaning heavily on the balusters, and stopping on every landing to take breath.

He was about to see her again! His heart beat so fast, that he felt faint and sick!

"Is Monsieur Noel Gerdy at home?" he asked the maid.

"No, sir. He has this moment gone out; but he left word that he would be back in half an hour."

"We will wait his return," said the Count; and he passed into the hall, followed by Clare.

Three persons were in the room into which the

Count and Mademoiselle d'Arange were shown—the cure of the parish, the doctor, and a very tall man wearing the Legion of Honor, whose dress and bearing betrayed the retired soldier.

They were all standing talking by the chimney-piece, and the arrival of the strangers seemed to cause them considerable astonishment.

The military man was the first to recover himself. Advancing, he placed a chair for Mademoiselle d'Arange, and bowed slightly to the Count.

The latter felt that his visit was an intrusion.

It was a false position, and the only way was to get out of it as speedily as possible.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I fear that my presence here may seem somewhat indiscreet." His words failed him, and he drew himself up abruptly. "Gentlemen, I am the Count de Valcourt."

At this name, the old soldier let his hands fall from the chair, the back of which he still held, and drew himself to his full height.

There was a flash of anger in his eyes, and his hands closed with a gesture of menace; but with a powerful effort he controlled his emotion, and walked, with a pale face and compressed lips, to the window.

Neither the Count nor the other two men perceived these rather eccentric proceedings upon the part of their military friend; but they did not escape the watchful eyes of Clare.

The Count advanced to the cure, feeling as awkward as a school-boy.

"I hope Madame Gerdy is better," he said. "I have heard that she has been very ill."

The doctor, whose sense of hearing would have beaten the finest terrier in Europe, advanced at once.

He was glad to make the acquaintance of the Count de Valcourt, a man well known in the political as well as the fashionable world.

"She is very ill, sir," he said, gravely. "In fact, I fear there is no hope."

The old gentleman turned away, and leaning his arm upon the chimney-piece, heaved a deep sigh.

After a long gulf of icy silence, he spoke again.

"Has she recovered consciousness?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"No, sir; but there has been a great change since yesterday. She has passed a restless night, with more or less of delirium; but an hour ago she became calmer, and asked to see her old friend the cure."

The priest shook his head sadly.

"My visit has been of no use; she did not even recognize me. Poor thing! poor thing! For ten years I have known her, and a dearer creature or a more charitable soul I have never met."

"Her sufferings must be horrible," said the doctor.

Almost immediately, and as an echo to his words, muffled cries and moans of pain were heard from a neighboring room.

"Do you hear—do you hear?" said the Count, shuddering from head to foot, and turning a haggard, wistful face to the bystanders. "Can't any of you help her?"

Time looked so small to him now. She was only a few feet from him. It seemed but yesterday he had said good-bye to her.

"I should like to see her," he said, almost timidly.

"That's impossible!" said the soldier, shortly.

At any other time, the proud old man would have remarked this tone, and have resented it; but his thought was elsewhere, and he was thinking of the past.

"And why mayn't I see her?" he said, pathetically.

"Because," said the soldier, sternly, "I think you might, at least, have the generosity to let her die in peace!"

The Count recoiled as from a blow. His eyes met those of the soldier, and, bending his head, he sunk into a chair.

"I see no reason why the Count de Valcourt should not see Madame Gerdy," said the doctor, wishing to cut short a scene that threatened to be disagreeable. "She would hardly perceive his entrance; and even if she did, what then?"

"Pardon me," put in the cure, "if I say that there would not be the slightest danger in the Count's visiting the sick-room. She is quite unconscious. I spoke to her a few minutes ago, and took her hand in mine; but she never made any sign of recognition."

The old soldier stood bolt upright in the middle of the room.

The deep lines on his careworn face seemed to deepen in the dim light around him.

It was evident he was giving himself the benefit of "a good think."

At last he advanced to the old nobleman, and, with an expressive gesture, pointed to the sick-room.

"You may go and see her," he said; "and may heaven comfort you both!"

The Count rose, but he staggered so painfully, that the doctor advanced to his assistance.

He pushed him away gently, and walked in first, followed by the doctor and the priest.

Clare and the old soldier remained on the threshold, facing the bed upon which the dying woman was laid.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE Count made three or four steps forward; then stood as if petrified at the sight before him.

That dying woman! Could that be Valerie?"

Nothing in the wan, deep-lined face—nothing even in the pinched features, recalled to him the beautiful girl whom he had so adored long years ago.

But she—she recognized him at once, or rather by some extraordinary intuition she divined his presence. As if galvanized, she rose to a sitting posture, whilst her night-dress, which had become unbuttoned in her recent convulsive struggles, betrayed her attenuated neck and shoulders. With a quick movement of her

wasted hands, she cast aside the band containing crushed ice, which had been placed upon her forehead, and then threw back the masses of her long hair, which were scattered on the pillow.

"Lionel!" she cried. "Lionel!"

The Count shuddered from head to foot, but never moved a step. He was too absorbed in the memory of the past, too unconscious of the miserable present, to see what the bystanders saw. A change—startling change—had taken place in the occupant of the bed.

Her features, contracted by pain, became softened; a light, as if from heaven, brightened her whole face; and her eyes, hollow from suffering, beamed with an infinite tenderness.

"Lionel!" she said, in a heart-rending voice. "At last you have come! Oh, how I have longed for this meeting! You can never know what anguish your absence has caused me. I would have died of grief had I not clung to the hope of seeing you again. You have been kept away from me, and by whom? Your relations. Ah! if they could only have known how much I loved you—that no one on this earth could ever love you as I have done, they might have relented. No; I have forgotten—my memory fails me. I remember now, it was you that were angry with me. Your friends had told you that I was betraying you for another. What had I ever done to make such enemies? I suppose my intense happiness made them envy me. Oh, how happy we were! It's an agony to think of it now! But you never believed what they said? You never lent an ear to their absurd calumnies? You treated them with the contempt they deserved, I'm sure of that, or else why are you here?"

The Sister of Mercy, who had arisen from her seat at the entrance of so many people into the sick-room, opened her eyes in evident astonishment.

"I betray you!" continued the dying woman. "It's only a madman could have believed such a thing! Why, I worshiped the very ground you walked upon. I would gladly have given my life to have saved you a pang of pain. I was only a poor lace-worker, and barely gained my living. You told me you were very poor, too, and were studying the law, and it used to make my heart ache to think that you were pinching yourself to make me comfortable and happy. Do you remember that you insisted upon arranging our little room on the Quay St. Michel, and how we papered the walls our own selves with a bright paper, covered with forget-me-nots and rose-buds? Oh, happy—happy days—gone now forever!"

The sad voice paused for a moment, but the sad eyes were still eloquent in their appeal.

"But one day I found out you had been deceiving me—you were not the poor student you had represented yourself to be. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, and I was taking home my work, when I saw you in a grand carriage and pair, behind which there stood two footmen in crimson and gold. I felt faint, and sick, and giddy—my work fell from my hands, and I stood as one paralyzed. That evening you told me the truth—that you were immensely rich, and belonged to one of the oldest families in France. Oh, Lionel! oh, my beloved one!—would that I never had known it!—would that you had never told me!"

Was she in her senses? or was her mind wandering in a land of dreams?

Heavy tears rolled slowly one by one down the wrinkled face of the Count de Valcourt. The doctor and the priest were silent, touched by the sad spectacle of an old man crying like a little child.

But a few hours before, the Count had felt his heart to be dead; and now this dying voice recalled it to life again, with all the fresh pulsations of youth. And yet how many long years had flown between!

"Then," pursued Valerie, "we had to leave our poor little room in the Quay St. Michel. You told me you wished me to try to be a great lady. You gave me masters—for I was so ignorant that I could hardly sign my name. It was then I felt the burden that was laid upon me. I felt I wasn't worthy of you. I lost all confidence in myself. I lost my careless happiness—my youthful gaiety. You thought to raise me; but, in doing so, you lowered me. You were proud of me, and made our love public; in doing so, you ruined it. Had I remained obscure and unknown, we might have both been happy still."

She paused again, and leant back exhausted. There was an extraordinary stillness in the room, and those present hung upon her words with a feverish emotion. The Sister of Mercy alone remained calm and unaffected. She had often seen delirious people before, and could not understand the meaning of the scene before her.

"These people must be mad themselves," she thought, "to listen to the incoherent ravings of a lunatic."

She felt that she was the only person in the room possessing a particle of common sense, and that it was her duty to interfere. She therefore advanced to the bed, and tried to make the patient lie down; at the same time smoothing and arranging the pillows.

"Come, come, madame!" she said; "cover yourself, or you'll be catching your death of cold."

"Hush! Let her speak!—let her speak!" murmured the Count, laying his hand gently on the Sister of Mercy's arm, and leading her from the bed.

"Who, then," went on the sick woman, unconscious of all that was passing around her—"who, then, could have told you that I had betrayed you? Spies must have been set upon me; and they discovered that a young officer came to see me. Yes, but this young officer was my brother—my brother Louis—my only living relative."

The tall military man before spoken of left his place at the door, and advanced towards the Count, but the old nobleman was quite as unconscious of what was passing around him as the dying woman herself.

"When my brother was eighteen years of age, and

found himself out of employment, he enlisted as a soldier, telling my mother it would be always one mouth less to fill, and that she could not afford to keep him at home. He went with his regiment to Algiers. He studied hard, became a great favorite with his officers, and was rapidly promoted. He was a lieutenant when he heard of what he called my disgrace. He was almost mad with grief and anger, and said he would never look on my face again. But he yielded to my prayers and entreaties, saying that my constancy and devotion were my sole excuses. He came to see me, but in secret. I had placed him in the dreadful position of being forced to blush for his sister. He made me promise never to mention his name in your presence, and, to avoid a scandal, never to allow you to meet each other. Ah," she moaned, "I have paid dearly for my few swift years of happiness!" Then brightening again, she said, "But you have come at last, and all is forgotten—for you believe me, Lionel—you believe me, don't you? I will write to Louis, and he will tell you that I have spoken the truth. You won't doubt his word—he never deceived any one in his life."

"Upon my honor," said the old soldier, "all that my sister has told you is the truth."

The sick woman did not hear him, but continued, in a voice that panted from exhaustion, "Your coming has done me so much good; I feel almost well again. I have been ill, very ill. I have lost all my good looks—but you will kiss me, won't you?"

She extended her arms—then, as it were, repulsed some phantom her imagination had conjured up.

"No, I can't kiss you until you promise that you won't take my child away. It will break my heart if you do. You tell me it will be to his advantage—that you will give him an illustrious name and a great fortune. No, I cannot part with him. He is my child, and I will keep him to myself. Earth has neither honors nor riches that can compensate me for the loss of my son. What! will nothing move you? Oh, unfortunate man, listen to me. I cannot do what you ask—I cannot take the child of another woman away from her. I cannot consent to this scheme. I want my own child, my own darling! Lionel! Lionel! listen to me! Renounce this fatal project—the thought alone is a crime! What! can neither tears or prayers move you? Well, have your own way. But we shall reap a bitter harvest in our old age? I foresee the future. I picture my son justly irritated against me, asking me to render him an account of the past. Oh, Heaven, how I suffer! He won't even believe that I am his mother. Lionel, pardon me! Oh! my only friend, I hadn't even the strength to resist, or the courage to obey!"

At this moment a door at the further end of the room opened, and Noel appeared, paler than usual, but calm and self-possessed.

The dying woman saw him, and started up as if galvanized. A terrible shock shook her from head to foot, her eyes dilated, and she raised her right arm, and pointed in the direction of Noel.

"Take him away—take him away!" she cried, in a loud and piercing voice. "Oh, save me from him—save me from that murderer!"

There was a convulsive movement; then she fell suddenly back. They one and all advanced to her assistance. But they could give her no aid.

She was dead!

A solemn silence reigned in the room.

Such is the majesty of death, and the terror that surrounds it, that even the strongest and the most skeptical bow their heads in fear and awe.

All present had been profoundly touched at the scene that had just taken place, and at the confession which had been wrung from delirium and pain.

The last words of Madame Gerdy, however, surprised no one except the Sister of Mercy. Apart from her, they knew the dreadful accusation which had been made against Albert.

It was, of course, to him that the unfortunate mother addressed her malediction.

Noel seemed completely overwhelmed with grief.

Kneeling beside the bed of her who had always been to him as a mother, he took one of her cold hands and pressed it to his lips.

"Dead!" he sobbed. "She is dead."

Near to him knelt the Sister of Mercy and the priest, imploring, in a monotonous tone of voice, the mercy of Heaven for one who had suffered so much upon earth.

In an arm-chair, with head thrown back, and a face as ashen pale as hers he had once loved so well, was the Count de Valcourt.

Clare and the doctor were bending over him. They had taken off his cravat and unbuttoned his shirt-collar, for he seemed gasping for breath.

With the help of the old soldier, whose red and swollen eyes told a tale of suppressed grief, they had rolled the arm-chair to the open window to give him air.

Three days ago such a scene would have killed the Count; but hearts hardened to grief and misfortune, as hands are hardened by labor.

Suddenly the old man burst into sobs, and wept like a little child.

"He is safe now," whispered the doctor to Clare, drawing her gently away, for she was crying, too. "Let us leave him alone with the dead."

CHAPTER XL.

ABOUT the time that this sad scene was taking place, Monsieur Daburon, with a preoccupied and worried expression of countenance, was mounting the staircase that led to his offices in the Palace of Justice.

A figure was descending at the same time. With an exclamation of surprise, he recognized Old Corkscrew.

"Monsieur Tabaret! I'm so glad to meet you! The very man I want!"

The queer old fellow, who was evidently in a state of

great fuss and agitation, simply raised his hat, and waving it in the air, passed on.

"Stop!" cried the magistrate; "I want to speak to you."

"Pardon me, sir!—pardon me! but I have important business at home!"

"But have you any news?" commenced Monsieur Daburon.

"Innocent, sir!—innocent!" said the Daddy, always harping upon the one subject. "I've fresh evidence; and, before three days are over, you'll open your eyes, and no mistake! Wait till you see the man with the ear-rings! Gevrol's got him! Gevrol's risen in my estimation! He's not near such a fool as he looks!"

And, without waiting for a reply, he continued his headlong course, still waving his hat in a melodramatic fashion, taking four steps at a time, at the imminent risk of breaking his neck.

"Obstinate old fool!" muttered the magistrate, evidently annoyed. "And I have so much to tell him?"

In the waiting-room adjoining his private office, upon a bench, Albert de Valcourt, in the custody of a police-officer, was seated, waiting his arrival.

"I will see you in a few moments," said the magistrate, speaking over his shoulder, as he opened the door.

In his study, his clerk was talking to a little withered-looking man, with a depressed expression of face, whose dress and make-up gave you the idea that he was a dramatic author in the last stage of poverty and destitution.

"You have received my letters?" asked Monsieur Daburon of the clerk.

"Yes, sir. The prisoner is here, and this is Monsieur Martin; who has just arrived from the Duchess d'Archange's house."

"That's all right!" said the magistrate, rubbing his hands with a satisfied air. Then, turning to the little old man, "Well, sir, what have you discovered?"

"That some one has climbed the wall."

"How long ago?"

"About five or six days."

"Are you sure about it?"

"As sure as I am sitting here. The trees and foot-prints are as plain as the nose on your face, if you'll pardon the liberty I take in so expressing myself."

"Go on," said the magistrate, with difficulty repressing a smile at this unintentional insult to the most prominent feature in his physiognomy.

"The thief—I suppose it was a thief, sir," continued Monsieur Martin, who prided himself on his oratory—"must have taken advantage of that time of day which is commonly called twilight to get over the wall before the rain commenced, and have gone away almost directly after the afore-mentioned rain was over. These circumstances are easy to be proved when we compare the wall on the outer side of the garden to that on the inner side. The fellow—he must have been as nimble as a squirrel!—climbed hand over hand in going up, but made use of a ladder in going down."

"How did you find that out?" asked the magistrate.

"Because of the holes in the wet earth, upon which the ladder was placed; and because at the top of the wall some of the lime, against which it leant, has crumbled off."

"Is that all?"

"Not all, sir. Three broken necks of bottles have been displaced from the coping, and a branch or two of the acacias are twisted and bent. Also, on a thorn sticking out from one of the branches, I found this little piece of gray leather, which looks to me as though it belonged to a glove."

The magistrate seized the fragment eagerly.

It was a piece torn from a pearl gray kid glove.

"I hope you took care, Martin," said Monsieur Daburon, "not to raise any suspicions in the house at which you have been making these investigations."

"Don't you be afraid, sir; I know what I'm up to. I'm an old bird, and ain't to be caught with chaff. The first thing I did was to leave my hat at the wine-shop round the corner; then I rings the bell at the Duchess d'Archange's door, saying as how I was the servant of a lady who lived in the next street, and that during my mistress's absence a favorite parrot had escaped out of the window, and made for her garden. They politely let me in, and gave me the run of the garden."

"You're a clever fellow, Martin," interrupted the magistrate; "and I shall not forget to mention your name at headquarters."

He pulled the bell as he spoke, whilst the detective, proud of the praises that had been bestowed upon him, backed out, nearly going on all-fours to express his gratitude and humility.

Then Albert was introduced.

"Have you decided, sir," said the magistrate, without further beating about the bush, "to explain to me how you passed your evening on Tuesday last?"

"I have already told you how I passed it. I have nothing more to say."

"No, sir! you have not told me; and I regret to be obliged to tell you that the version you have given is false!"

At this insult, the prisoner's face flushed crimson, and his eyes flashed.

"All that you did upon that evening I know," continued the magistrate; "I have it upon the clearest evidence." He paused, and, speaking very slowly, looked full in the prisoner's face. "I have it upon the evidence of Mademoiselle d'Archange herself."

At the name of Clare, the face of the accused, contracted by a firm determination to betray nothing, quivered for a moment.

A close observer would have said that the change was one of a great relief, such as might be seen in a man who, by a miracle, escapes a danger that seemed almost imminent.

Still he was silent.

"Mademoiselle d'Archange," continued the magistrate,

"has told me all. Nay, she has told me in detail everything that occurred on Tuesday evening."

Still Albert hesitated.

"I'm not laying a trap for you," added Monsieur Daburon. "I am speaking to you as one gentleman would to another. I repeat, then, that Mademoiselle d'Archange has told me all."

This time Albert made up his mind to speak.

His explanations coincided exactly with those of Clara. Either Albert was innocent, or, if guilty, she had been his accomplice.

The magistrate felt convinced that this could not be the case. He knew she was innocent and above all suspicion.

Where, then, was he to seek the assassin?

"Yousee, sir," said the magistrate, severely, "that you have been deceiving me. You risk your head, sir; and what's worse, you are exposing justice to a most deplorable error. Why didn't you speak the truth from the very first?"

"Sir," answered Albert. "Mademoiselle d'Archange, in granting me an interview, confided to me her honor."

"And you would rather die than speak of this interview?" interrupted Monsieur Daburon, ironically. "You are quite a hero, Monsieur de Valcourt; and instead of living in our prosaic times, ought to have flourished in the days of chivalry."

"I'm not the hero you suppose me to be," said the young man simply. "If I told you that I hadn't counted upon Clare, I would be telling you a falsehood. I was only waiting. I knew that, directly she knew of my arrest, she would brave all to save me. But I thought perhaps she mightn't have heard of the great misfortune that had fallen upon me—that her grandmother would have taken some means to hide it from her; so I made up my mind to keep her name out of the whole affair."

There was not the slightest tone of bravado in this reply. Monsieur Daburon regretted his irony, and dismissed the prisoner with a few kind words, expressive of his hope that his innocence would shortly be proved.

"Bring in Gevrol now," said the magistrate to his clerk.

The chief of the detective force was absent; but his witness, the man with the ear-rings, was waiting in the corridor.

Accordingly, he was brought in, and placed in front of Monsieur Daburon.

A short man, with a neck sunk into his shoulders, robust, and stunted like a dwarf oak. His hair and beard, as white as the driven snow, made his sunburnt face look almost the color of mahogany.

He had large hands, unwashed, hard and horny, with knobby knuckles, reminding one of the hands of a gorilla.

He wore the dress of a well-to-do fisherman from the north coast of France; and carried in his great brown ears a pair of enormous ear-rings, in the shape of an anchor.

It required two policemen to push him into the magistrate's presence.

This old sea-dog was very timid and bashful.

He came in, balancing himself as though he were in the last stage of drunkenness, after the manner of his tribe, rolling his quid of tobacco from one side of his mouth to the other, and hitching up his trousers, as if they were in danger of tumbling about his knees at every lurch he made.

The moment he entered, Monsieur Daburon recognized the portrait drawn by the little ragamuffin witness, at La Jonchere.

"He had a face as red as a sliced beet root. He wore a round jacket, with large pockets at the sides, and sticking out of one was a blue-striped pocket-handkerchief. He also wore ear-rings—large ear-rings—very large."

The magistrate also recognized that the man before him was as good a creature as ever breathed.

Honesty and kindness beamed from every wrinkle in his bronzed face.

"Your name?"

"Pierre Lerouge."

"Are you any relation to a woman called Claudine Lerouge?"

"I'm her husband, your honor."

"What!" thought Monsieur Daburon. "The husband of the murdered woman is alive, and yet the police are ignorant of the fact!"

"But," resumed the magistrate, "I've always understood she was a widow. All her friends said so, and she herself in particular."

"In course she did!" put in the sailor. "We made up that yarn between us. I was dead to her, and she was dead to me."

"Ah! that was the state of affairs, was it? You know, I suppose, that she is dead for good and all this time? Poor thing, she has been cruelly murdered!"

"I've been told all about it, your honor," said the man. "The gentleman who came to arrest me told me the particulars." Here he wiped his forehead with his pocket-handkerchief, which, in size, resembled a tablecloth. "Ah! she was a bad 'un—a bad 'un, and no mistake!"

"What?—and you, her husband, can have the heart to blame her, now she's gone?"

"Blame her?" interrupted the man. "And who has got the right and title to blame her as I have? Wasn't I her husband?—and hasn't it been through her that I have been watched by the police as though I were a thief or a convict? Yes she was a bad 'un; and many's the time I've told her that she'd come to a bad end."

"You told her that, did you?"

"A hundred times over, your honor—a hundred times over!"

"And why? Come, come, my friend, don't get excited. How long ago was it when you thought it proper to tell your wife her fortune in this particularly cheerful and sagacious manner?"

"Long ago, your honor?" said the sailor, quite simply. "It might be thirty year ago when I told her so for the first time. She was always flighty, and stuck up, and wanted to meddle in the affairs of her betters. She used to say that many a gold piece was to be gained in keeping secrets for people as didn't know how to keep them for themselves. 'Gain?' I used to say. You'll gain nothing but shame and sorrow. To lend your hand to hide the villainies and wickedness of the rich—why it's for all the world like stuffing your mattress with thorns, with the idea that you'll sleep the better for it!" But, lor' bless your honor, she was as obstinate as a young donkey, and wouldn't listen to a word I said!"

"And what business was it your wife got mixed up in, eh?" asked the magistrate. "Come, come, my friend, don't begin a thing without going on with it. You are here to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth!"

Lerouge had placed his hat upon a chair, alternately pulling at his fingers, and cracking each knuckle, or, by way of variety, scratching his head violently. This was his way of summoning up his ideas.

"For the first two years of our married life, excepting a sharp squall or two, we got on famously. Claudine steered me wherever she chose. Ah, she was a crafty one, she was! Her great fault was her love of dress. All that I gained she spent upon her back. At the baptism of the boy that was born to us (I called him Jacques, after my old father), I spent all my savings which I had put by to purchase a small piece of land that adjoined our cottage."

The magistrate was boiling over with impatience. The honest sailor was losing the thread of his discourse, and floundering about like an old porpoise in the vain endeavor to pick it up again.

"Well, go on!" said Monsieur Daburon, "let's come to the 'business' you were speaking about—the business your wife got mixed up in?"

"I'm coming to that directly, your honor," said Lerouge, commencing at his finger joints again, till they went off like so many crackers. "Now we were getting on pretty well, as I said before, and I was as fond of my wife as ever, when, one morning, I saw sneaking into our house a servant belonging to the Count de Valcourt, whose estate is about half a mile off. He was a fellow I never liked at all. His name was Germain, and he had a way of humbugging the women as didn't suit my reckonings at all. I asked my wife what that good-for-nothing land-lubber had to do in my house. 'Oh,' says she, 'he's only come to ask if I'll take a child to nurse.' I wouldn't hear of this; we weren't so poor but that Claudine could afford to nurse her own baby. She said she wanted to buy me a piece of land out of her own earnings—a piece of land which I had set my heart upon. So, as usual, I gave in, and she had her own way at last."

"Go on!" said the magistrate getting more and more irritated.

"I am going on, your honor," said the sailor. "I've now come to the part where Claudine got a letter, telling her to start at once for Paris to get the child. I remember as it was in the evening, and the wind was sou'-west."

"Don't mind about the wind, as long as it carries you to your destination—that's all you've got to look to," said Monsieur Daburon, smiling in spite of his annoyance. "Well, you went to Paris?"

"I remember as it was in the evening, and the wind was sou'-west," went on the ancient mariner, clinging to his drifting thoughts like a drowning man to a raft, "and, my wife, seeing as it was heating up for rain, put off her journey till the next day. I never says a word, but when she gets into the coach, dressed up like a ship in full sail, what does I do but gets up on the top, and follows her unbeknown to the railway station."

Here Lerouge paused, and winked three consecutive times at the magistrate, as indicating his extraordinary shrewdness and penetration.

CHAPTER XLII.

At last the patience of the magistrate culminated.

"Stop!" he said; "I see, if we go on at this rate, you'll never finish till the middle of next week."

"I'm very sorry, your honor," said the man; "but I am trying to tell the truth, and you can't think how it puzzles and bullies a chap's brain to get at it."

"Suppose I question you, and you answer me; won't that do?"

"Famous!" said the sailor, his sunburnt face broadening into a grin of intense relief. "Fire away, guv'nor, and I'll steer right ahead!"

"Well," said the magistrate; "you and your wife journeyed up to Paris together?"

"Yes, your honor, we did. She gave a little shriek when she saw me a-top of the coach."

"I don't want to hear about that; what I want to know is, the name of the woman from whose house you took the child."

"Madame Gerdy. I learnt a lot about her whilst I was waiting for my wife in the wine merchant's round the corner."

"Stop!" said the magistrate; "stick to your subject. I don't care what you heard at the wine merchant's round the corner. Come to the point. Were you present at the changing of the children?"

"I was," said the sailor; "and this is how it happened."

Monsieur Daburon gave a sigh of relief.

"We—my wife and I—rode down in a carriage and pair, as grand as though we were lords and ladies. In the evening, after a long drive, we came to a village inn, at which we drew up; the coachman, who seemed to have got his instructions, telling us he was to put up there, and that we were all to turn in. Directly we entered, who do you think I claps my eyes on, but that

beggar Germain, in company with a young woman carrying a child, so exactly similar in dress and features to the one my wife was a-nursing, that I bursts out into a cold perspiration, and calls for a glass of brandy-and-water directly. After supper, the two women spoke about going to bed; and then we found out that the inn had only two sleeping rooms. When I think of it now, it seems to me as if that inn had been built expressly for them to carry out their plan. The landlady says that the nurses could sleep in one, and I and the valet in t'other. All of which we agreed to. I was in a devil of a temper the whole of that evening, because I caught signals going on between my wife and that rascal Germain; besides I felt awful uncomfortable in my own thoughts: and to make myself forget all about the scurvy trick I was lending a hand to, I drank more than was good for me. I knew I was doing wrong, and I was wild with my own self for letting Claudine twist me round her finger to help her in her deceit and wickedness. My family, your honor, are known on the coast as the honest Lerouges. We haven't had a stain on our name since first we came into Normandy. And now I felt I was lending myself to a fraud and a lie!"

Here commenced an extra cracking of the knuckles and a fiercer onslaught in the shape of a head scratching.

Monsieur Daburon's only response to this last speech was a thundering blow on his head.

Lerouge hitched up his trousers, and hurried on.

"I didn't go to bed that night: I sat up and listened. Germain was in bed, and soon as sound a sleep as a top. Towards about two in the morning I hears a moving in the room where the women were. I holds my breath and listens. I'm an honest man, your honor, but I don't mind owning that on this particular occasion I peeps through the keyhole, and what do I see but my wife standing beside the bed with the child in her arms, a-peering down into the face of the other woman, who was snoring for all the world like the wind when it's beating up for a gale."

"And what did you do?" asked the magistrate, interested for the first time in the disjointed narrative he had been listening to.

"I bursts open the door, and rushes at my wife. 'Don't you do it, Claudine!' I cries out—'don't you do it! If you do, you'll live to repent it!' I didn't speak this in a whisper, mind ye; I roared as though I were speaking on deck through a speaking-trumpet. At the hullabaloo I kicked up, in rushes the valet with a lighted candle. At the sight of him I loses my head, and drawing out my clasp-knife, I snatched the child from my wife and marks it on the arm with a deep cut. 'You can't change the little one now,' I cries out 'without my knowing it. He is marked for life!'"

The sailor paused, as if overcome at the scene he had conjured up.

Heavy drops of sweat gathered on his forehead, trickled down his cheeks, and paused in the deep wrinkles of his face, from whence they fell on to his sunburnt hands, which were clasped upon his knees.

The poor "old salt" was puffing for breath like one of the sails of his bark when becalmed on the eve of a hurricane.

But the magistrate held him with his calm and glittering eye—or, rather, by his impatient gestures goaded him on, as the whip goads on the slave who is dropping with fatigue.

"The wound I had given the child was a terrible one. The poor little thing nearly bled to death. But I was mad—mad with shame, with rage, with jealousy! I thought nothing of the future; I only thought of the present. I swore by all the oaths I knew, and I'm pretty well up in that 'ere rubbish, that I'd write down in my log-book—I mean my pocket-book, your honor—all that had passed between us; and if they didn't sign it, they'd better look out for themselves!"

"Did they sign?" said the magistrate, incredulously.

"They did your honor; the rascal of a valet putting his name the first, with this provision—that on my solemn word of honor, as a sailor and a man, I wasn't to say a word to the Count de Valcourt, which word I have kept; and if the Count was to come in here this blessed minute, I'd be as dumb as a dead cod!"

With which characteristic finale, the Widow Lerouge's husband sat down, and eyed the magistrate with the virtuous indignation of a martyr.

CHAPTER XLIII.

MONSIEUR DABURON was astonished at the revelation that had just been made to him.

After walking up and down the room for a minute or two, during which his nautical friend occupied himself in cleaning his face with a piece of brown paper which he "hauled" out of his pocket for the purpose, the magistrate suddenly returned to business.

"And where's that declaration, or rather affidavit, which all of you signed?"

"Here it is, your honor. Monsieur Gevrol—and a hard nut he is to crack—told me that I'd get into trouble if I didn't go straight and above board with you."

"Give me the paper."

After fumbling about in pockets that seemed unfathomable, Lerouge fished up an old pocket-book, tied round with a bit of tarred rope; and, after unknotting it with his teeth, he took out a piece of folded paper, yellow with time, and carefully sealed in four places with what was evidently his own thumb-mark.

The magistrate took the paper, and, as he unfolded it, some sand—"the sands of time," he thought—that had been placed upon it crumbled upon his fingers, and fell to his feet.

Monsieur Daburon sighed as he looked at the old sailor. "I wonder what has become of the witnesses who signed this paper!"

Lerouge thought the question addressed to him.

"Germain is dead," he said—"drowned by the up-

setting of a boat. My wife has been murdered; but the other nurse is still alive."

"Where does she live?"

"In a cottage on the De Valcourt estates."

"Her name?"

"Brosette."

"And what happened after the night in question?" asked the magistrate, as he wrote down the name and address of the second nurse.

"The next day, your honor, Claudine had a long talk with me, and succeeded in making me promise to keep the whole thing a secret. The baby was only a little feverish after the wound I'd given it; but, as I said before, it was marked for life."

"And Madame Gerdy,—did she ever know of the scene that passed at the village inn?"

"I don't think that she ever did. Howsomever, I'd rather not enter into any conversation upon that point. I never prospered after that miserable night. Money ill-gained brings no profit. My wife took to drink, and my home became a shame to me."

"And what did you do then?" asked the magistrate.

"Well, your honor, I did the next best thing I could do. I left her, taking my son with me."

"And what became of her after that?" inquired M. Daburon.

"I don't know; but I was informed that she left her cottage in Normandy about a year after I did."

"And you never saw her again?"

"Never."

"Come—come! said Monsieur Daburon—"refresh your memory. You were seen at the house only a day or two before the murder."

"So I was!" said the man, scratching his head, confusedly; but, you see, I only went because I was forced to go. And a deal of trouble and money it cost me to find her. No one knew what had become of her. It was like trying to find a needle in a bundle of hay. Luckily, a lawyer fellow as I knew, who had managed business matters between me and my wife, found out the address of Madame Gerdy and it was through her I traced Claudine to La Jonchere. A friend of mine, Gervais by name, offered me a place in his barge, and that's how I came to Paris. Ah, your honor! I shall never forget the day when I saw her again. She didn't recognize me in the least. She'd made up her mind I was dead, and when I told her my name, she fell back in a fit."

"All this doesn't explain in the least the cause of your visit to your wife."

"It was only about our son, your honor, that I called upon her. Our little one had become a man, and wanted to get married; but, according to our laws, your honor, he couldn't do that without the consent of his mother, so I brought her a deed, prepared by a notary, which she signed, and here it is."

Monsieur Daburon took the paper, and examined it attentively. Then he said, suddenly, "Has it ever occurred to you as to who could have been the murderer of your wife?"

Lerouge made no answer.

"Have you no suspicions?" persisted the magistrate.

"None whatever, said the sailor, simply. 'I've sometimes thought, howsomever, that the rich people, whose secret she'd got hold of, had got tired of her and her evil tongue, and had paid somebody to put her out of the way.'

This being all the evidence the man had to give, Monsieur Daburon dismissed him, with orders that he was to remain in Paris, in case he might be required; but, at the same time, he was to be under the supervision of the police, and kept at the expense of the government.

"So, then," thought the magistrate, as he returned to his desk, feeling utterly dispirited at the turn affairs had taken, "guilty, or not guilty, Albert de Valcourt is the legitimate son of the Count de Valcourt, and Noel is the son of Madame Gerdy."

The magistrate felt he had acted with too much precipitation, and that he had placed himself in a position that bordered on the ridiculous.

The first step that it was incumbent upon him to adopt was to send for the Count, and explain to him how matters stood.

He would be obliged to say to the old man, "Sir, your legitimate son is not the one that I thought, but the other."

What a situation! Not only painful, but simply absurd. The only consolation is that Clare's lover is innocent. Noel, also! He would have to be told the bitter truth. All his bright hopes dashed to earth, just as they were soaring to the skies. What a cruel awakening from his short day-dream! But doubtless the Count would make him some reparation. He certainly deserved it.

These were the somewhat disjointed reflections of the magistrate, governed, however, with the one paramount idea, the one recurring thought, "that made all other thoughts its slave," "Who was the guilty man?"

A notion flashed across his brain, which, at first, seemed improbable.

But, notwithstanding his throwing it contemptuously aside, it recurred to him again and again. He turned and returned it, twisted it, flattened it out, and was just folding it up neatly, satisfied in his own mind that he was on the right track, when his clerk announced the Count de Valcourt.

CHAPTER XLIII.

DADDY TABARET, alias Old Corkscrew, as we all know, was a great talker; but he was something better than that, *doer* also; and, when he chose, as thorough a man of business as any to be found in the Stock Exchange.

Deserted by his friend, the magistrate, and thrown upon his own resources, he went to work with redoubled energy, without losing a minute, or indulging himself in a moment's repose.

The story of his scampering about in an open carriage was no fiction. Scattering his money right and left, the queer old fellow had found a lot of recruits, principally detectives out of employment, several banker's clerks of shady reputation, and a couple of fraudulent bankrupts. With these honorable auxiliaries, seconded by his fanatical admirer, Lecoq, he scoured the country round Bougival. His researches were not entirely futile. After three days of minute investigation, he was able to prove satisfactorily that the murderer had not taken the train at the nearest railway station (that of Rueil), but had proceeded to the next (Chatou).

Daddy Tabaret recognized the description given by one or two of the railway guards. A young man, with dark hair and eyes, and a thick black moustache, wearing a great coat, and carrying a silk umbrella.

He arrived by the train that left Paris for St. Germain at half-past eight in the evening, and seemed pressed for time. On leaving the station, he walked rapidly away on the road to Bougival. On the route towards the village of La Jonchere two men and a woman had remarked him on account of his half-running pace, and the energetic way he puffed at his cigar.

At the bridge which, at Bougival, connects the two banks of the Seine, he attracted still further observation. This bridge is a toll-bridge and the murderer, presumably, had forgotten the circumstance.

Dashing through it, always at the same running pace, with his elbows pressed to his sides, with lips compressed, he sped onwards. The keeper had to rush out into the road, and call after him for the toll.

He seemed much annoyed at the delay, and throwing a sixpence at the man, continued his headlong career without waiting for the change.

This was not all.

The station-master at Rueil remembered that about two minutes before the ten-fifteen train, a man, in a state of great exhaustion, as from running, asked for a second-class ticket for Paris, and was so faint from the haste that he had made, that he reeled like a drunken man as he entered the compartment.

The personal description of this man answered exactly with that given by the railway guards at Chatou, and with that of the toll-keeper at Bougival.

"Last, but, perhaps, not least," to quote Old Corkscrew, "I think I'm on the track of a man who travelled up to Paris in the same carriage with my exhausted young friend with the black moustache and the silk umbrella."

Such was the report, carefully written out as a bankrupt files his schedule, of Daddy Tabaret when he presented himself on Monday at the Palace of Justice.

In one of the corridors he met Gevrol and his assistant.

The chief of the detective police was evidently in great good humor. In fact, in such good humor, that he was positively offensive.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he roared out, directly he saw the figure of the Daddy, who had been such a thorn in his side on his detective expeditions. "Ha! ha! Here you are, Old Corkscrew! In the words of your friend Lecoq, 'A wonderful man—a ree-markable man! He'll draw the cork for us in less than five minutes!' Ha! ha! ha!"

He suddenly stopped in his uproarious merriment, startled at the change in Daddy's appearance.

He was pale and dejected, looking wistfully before him, and sniffing as usual, like a dog that has lost the scent, and has almost given up all hopes of finding it.

"Laugh away, Gevrol!" he said. "Chaff me as much as you like. I deserve it, and when I deserve a thing" (this with a piteous sigh), "I always make up my mind to bear it."

Gevrol was astonished; the Daddy was, ordinarily, such a peppery old fellow.

"I've caused an innocent man to be accused, and I don't know how to retract my accusation."

Gevrol rubbed his hands with such extraordinary delight, that it was a wonder he didn't rub the skin off.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he screamed, wiping the tears from his eyes in affected mirth. "You're a genius—you know how to do the thing. It's only the guilty that such a dunder-head as I am can get hold of, whilst you catch the innocent! I'm dashed if I don't think you'll put all our noses out of joint before you've done, sir. I take off my hat, and bow before your superior intelligence."

As he spoke, he made a bow of such a sweeping character, that it was a wonder he didn't lose his balance, and go on all-fours.

The Daddy bent his gray head, and clasped his thin hands together.

"I don't think you're quite just, Gevrol," he said. "Remember, though I'm an old man in years, I'm young in the profession. I've bowled you out sometimes, and I felt proud of bowling out such an old hand as you. My success turned my head. I find out now, when it's too late, that I'm only an apprentice, whilst you are a master in the craft. Help me with your counsel, and you'll find me a pupil to be proud of."

Monsieur Tabaret extended his hands as he spoke.

Gevrol was, perhaps, about the vainest man in creation, and this utter submission upon the part of Tabaret flattered him immensely.

"I presume," he said, in a softened and protecting tone, "that you are alluding to the murder at La Jonchere."

"I am—I am! Oh, dear Monsieur Gevrol, I thought I could get on without you; but I find I can't!"

The sly old fox looked as contrite and as penitent as though he had been caught in a henroost with a plump chicken in his mouth; but in reality he was triumphant, and it required all his self-control to prevent him from bursting out laughing.

"Vain idiot!" he thought, as he looked at Gevrol's fat, complacent face. "I'll mould those addled brains of yours into any shape I please, and make you do just as I like."

Gevrol scratched his nose, and then conferred the same benefit upon his chin, with an air of such extreme wisdom that it was as much as the Daddy could do to repress his irritation and contempt.

He looked patronizingly down on the eager little face that looked up into his, and pretended to hesitate.

He was so glad to be able to crow over the man who had so often outwitted and placed him in a ridiculous position with his chiefs at the Palace of Justice.

"Come, come!" he said, grandly; "don't be disheartened, my good friend. I'll give you a shove in the shoulder whenever you require it. I think you've got ability, and I like to help a clever fellow. Call on me to-morrow, and we'll have a talk about the business. By the way, have you heard about the new witness I've pounced upon?"

"No," said the Daddy, thrown off his guard for a moment.

"That fellow on the bench over there."

"And who may he be?" inquired Old Corkscrew, peering with his small, restless eyes at the figure indicated.

"Go and ask him his name. He'll tell you it's Pierre Lerouge."

"She wasn't a widow, then?"

"So it appears," answered Gevrol, rolling his eyes, and in a jeering tone; "since he owns that he had the honor of once being her happy and proud husband."

"Oh!" murmured the old man. "And has his evidence been worth anything?"

In a few words the head of the detective force gave his volunteer friend the synopsis of the history told by Lerouge to the magistrate.

"And what do you think of it, Master Wisehead?" he said, as he ended his recital.

"What do I think of it?" stammered the Daddy, whose face was more stupid than ever in its look of blank astonishment—"what do I think of it? I think—I think—no, I'm dashed if I can think at all!"

"That's a knock on the head, eh?" said Gevrol, radiant with happiness at having settled his old friend.

"A knock on the head!" moaned the old man. "It's worse than that; it's a smasher!"

Suddenly he looked up again, and gave Gevrol a blow in his stomach that made him bend, as though he were bowing to a creditor, or to one of the crowned heads in Europe.

"I've forgotten," he cried, "that there is a man waiting for me at my house—an important witness! I must be off! Good-bye—good-bye!"

"He's cracked!" said the chief of the detective force, looking after the old man, as he hurried away, with an air of mingled pity and contempt.

But Monsieur Tabaret was perfectly sane, and had never felt his brain to be in a better condition than when he was rushing along the quay, and thinking of the turn affairs had taken respecting the mysterious murder of the Widow Lerouge.

CHAPTER XLIV.

"THANK goodness!" muttered the old man, pausing in his hurried walk homewards, "that for to-day I shall have the privilege of being alone, and confer upon myself the inestimable benefit of a good think. Poor Noel, he, at least, won't eat his chop with the same appetite when he hears the news. What does it matter, after all? I'll adopt him if he likes, and give him my name. It hasn't got a handle to it like the De Valcourts; but it's an honest name, and none of our set have disgraced it as yet. After all, Gevrol's story doesn't change the situation of the young Viscount, nor alter my opinion as to his guilt. He is the real heir to the estates, and much good may they do him. It is very evident that neither he nor his father are acquainted with the extraordinary circumstances of the case. He believes as implicitly as his father, that a substitution really did take place. Of these facts Madame Gerdy must have also been ignorant, and they must have told her some cock-and-bull story about the wound made upon the infant's arm by the sailor. Yes; but Madame Gerdy must have been convinced that Noel was really and truly her own child; and when he was restored to her, she must have verified the marks, and have been satisfied in her own mind as to their accuracy or inaccuracy. When Noel found the Count's letters in her desk, she must have hastened to explain to him!"

Daddy Tabaret started back with a cry of fear, as though some fearful reptile had suddenly barred his way, and reared itself before him.

He was frightened at his own thought, a thought that pointed to Noel as the murderer of the Widow Lerouge.

"He assassinated her," argued Old Corkscrew, "to prevent her confessing that the changing of the children never took place; and then he burnt all the letters and papers that could have proved it."

The idea was too horrible. He was disgusted with himself for having harbored it, even for an instant.

"What an old idiot I am," he exclaimed, again rushing forward at his usual headlong pace. "I think I'm becoming an infidel, an unbeliever in all that's pure and good in this world. It serves me right, though. It's only the consequence of the frightful profession in which I take so much pride. To think of my doubting Noel, my adopted son, my heir—a young fellow to be proud of, who is virtue and honor personified—Noel, who, for the ten years I have had the happiness of knowing him, has taught me to esteem and love him, as the incarnation of a true friend and a devoted son."

He argued with himself thus, forcing himself to repel the doubts that beset him. Yet an inner voice kept whispering with an irritating persistency, "But suppose it is Noel?"

The Daddy had reached the Rue St. Lazare.

Before the door of his residence, a neat little brougham was drawn up, harnessed to one of the most splen-

did bay mares it had ever been the fortune of the old man to look upon.

"What a beautiful creature!" said the Daddy, unable to resist stroking the arched and glossy neck. "It appears I have got some respectable people amongst my tenants."

He had some of exactly the opposite description also; for he had hardly made the flattering reflection recorded above, than he saw issuing forth Monsieur Ducroe—honest Monsieur Ducroe, who has already been introduced to our readers as the friend of Miss Nellie Nicholson, and whose presence in any house announced ruin, as plainly as mutes at the door announce death.

CHAPTER XLV.

OLD CORKSCREW, who knew everything and everybody, was perfectly well acquainted with the character of the honest money-lender. In fact, he had been rather intimate with him when he was collecting some rare old books which Ducroe had seized on a bill of sale.

"Hilloh, old Crocodile!" he cried out; "so you've got dealings in my house, have you?"

"So it appears," answered Ducroe, drily, who did not like the familiar tone adopted by the Daddy.

"Well, well, you're a clever fellow, and no mistake."

Then, stimulated by a very natural curiosity, praise-worthy in a proprietor who likes to have his rents paid regularly, he asked, anxiously: "And which of my tenants may it be whose ruin you are contemplating?"

"I've never ruined anybody!" retorted Monsieur Ducroe, with an air of offended dignity. "Did you ever lose anything in your transactions with me? If you want a proof of that, go and ask your young friend, the barrister, and he'll pretty soon tell you whether he has any reason to regret having made my acquaintance."

Monsieur Tabaret was painfully surprised.

What! Noel, the steady Noel, the client of such a man as Ducroe! What could it all mean? Then he remembered the loan he had made on Thursday to the young barrister, and, without being able to explain the feeling, he felt suspicious and uncomfortable.

"I know," he said, trying to draw the other fellow out, "that Noel has very heavy expenses."

Ducroe could not bear to hear one of his customers attacked without defending him.

"It is not *he*," objected the money-lender, "that's been extravagant; only a girl he's engaged to—fat little thing—who's got an appetite that would eat up the devil, horns, hoofs, and all!"

The Daddy was shocked. Noel in love with a woman of whom even Ducroe disapproved! Ducroe, whose business it was to make the acquaintance of extravagant and disreputable women! The revelation went like a dagger to the old man's heart.

"Oh, I know all about that!" he said, grinning a ghastly smile. "We must sow our wild oats."

"Yes, but if we sow them at the rate of a thousand a year, and *owe*, at the end of four years, about the same sum of money, I can't see that we have reaped a good harvest."

In four years, four thousand pounds!

Daddy Tabaret's heart swelled painfully. To hide his emotion, he simulated a distressing cough.

"Don't let me detain you any longer," he said, hurriedly. "I'm suffering from bronchitis. Good-bye—good-bye!"

And so he left the money-lender, feeling somewhere, in a corner of his poor, worn-out old heart, the same immense grief that breaks the heart of an affectionate father, who has just discovered that the son upon whom he had built all his hopes had turned out to be a villain and a scoundrel!

With eyes half blinded by tears, he was rushing up the stairs that led to his rooms, when a whirlwind of lace and silk barred his passage.

Above the whirlwind of lace and silk he saw a pretty, smiling face, with lovely dark eyes, surmounted by hair as black as the raven's wing.

She passed him, with a rustle and a flash, and disappeared into the neat little brougham, that drove off at a pace that was worthy of the beautiful bay mare that had attracted the Daddy's attention.

On the landing, Monsieur Tabaret met his porter, leaning against the wall, and investigating, with tearful eyes, a gold piece, which glistened in the palm of his hand.

"Oh, monsieur," he said, "why didn't you come five minutes sooner? That lady—that beautiful lady, as you saw going down the stairs, has been asking after Monsieur Noel Gerdy. She gave me twenty francs to answer her questions. It seems that she has heard that Monsieur Gerdy is going to get married, and it has been rumored to her he was coming into a big fortune, and she could account for it in no other way. I think she must be his young woman, or something of that sort. I understand now why he goes out every evening."

"Monsieur Gerdy?"

"Yes, Monsieur. I never spoke to him when he did, because he looked as if he didn't want to be noticed, and always went out by way of the stable door, instead of the public one."

The porter had been speaking hitherto with eyes affectionately attached to the gold piece he held in his palm. When he raised his head to interrogate the face of his lord and master, Daddy Tabaret had disappeared.

"Ha, ha!" chuckled the porter to himself. "I wouldn't mind betting five shillings that the master is off to have another peep at that pretty girl. What an old fool it is! As if she'd give him so much as a smile for all his money. The old mummy!"

The porter was right; Daddy Tabaret had scampered after the lady in the lace and silk, and was just in time to see the brougham and the superb bay mare, turning the corner of the street.

"Thunder and lightning!" he muttered. "I

overtake her! The truth lies there; and it's only through her that I shall discover the mystery!"

CHAPTER XLVI.

OLD CORKSCREW was in one of those conditions of nervous excitement that makes a man do wonders.

He was round the corners of the Rue St. Lazare like a flash; and—oh, happiness!—at fifty yards in front of him, saw the brougham and the bay mare arrested in their swift course amongst a crowd of carts and carriages.

"I'll catch her yet!" he said, looking around eagerly for a cab.

Not one to be seen.

Willingly, like Richard the Third, he would have cried at that moment, "My fortune—my fortune for a cab."

The brougham had now disengaged itself from the lock, and the bay mare was speeding away at a better pace than ever, followed by the Daddy in right gallant style.

He had taken off his black silk necktie, and tied it tightly round his waist; and all the time he ran he cast haggard glances to the right and left, in search of a cab.

At last—at last! Just as he felt that his legs were giving way under him—a cab, an empty cab, passed him.

He waved his arms at the driver in a desperate manner, like a drowning man, and, rushing forward, plunged in head foremost; directing him as he did so, to follow the brougham with the bay mare.

"Keep up with it," he gasped, as he mopped his perspiring face with an old cotton handkerchief, about the size of a tray-cloth, "and I'll give you a Napoleon for your trouble."

The cabman winked; and, giving his skinny horses a vigorous flick with the whip, dashed off in pursuit.

The brougham stopped twice—once at a shop gorgeous with Indian shawls, and rich with festoons of old lace; next, at a confectioner's, where the beautiful young lady made extensive purchases in the shape of *bon-bons* and chocolate drops, upon which she made an onslaught before she returned to her carriage.

Daddy Tabaret was disgusted.

"That's how the money goes," he muttered; "frittered away upon trifles. Whilst the man who supplies her with it is wasting his life in brain-work and toil."

At last the brougham and the bay mare came to their journey's end, and were dismissed; and a minute after the Daddy followed the young lady as she glided into the house at the Rue de Provence.

Old Corkscrew opened the door of the porter's lodge.

"Oblige me with the name of that lady who has just entered," he said.

The man looked astonished, and hardly disposed to answer.

"Her name?" said the old man.

His tone was so short, and yet so imperious, that the porter, taken by surprise, stammered out, "Miss Nellie Nicholson."

"Upon what floor does she live?"

"The second."

A few moments afterwards, the old man was seated in the drawing-room of Miss Nicholson, who, as her maid informed him, had just returned from a drive, and would see him directly she had changed her dress.

Daddy Tabaret was astonished at the luxury and taste of the furniture and decorations of the apartment, and had taken out his spectacles, and was prying and sniffing about, calculating the value of every article and "*objet d'art*," when the door opened, and the entrance of Nellie prevented any further investigation.

She had taken off her walking costume, and thrown on a black satin peignoir, trimmed with cherry-colored satin. Her splendid hair, somewhat disordered by her bonnet, fell in waves behind her delicate little ears. The Daddy was quite upset. For the time being, he felt inclined to forgive Noel for having made a fool of himself.

"You wished to see me, I believe?" she said, bowing gracefully.

"Madam," said Daddy Tabaret, "I am a friend of Noel's—his best friend, I may say."

"Pray sit down, monsieur," said the young lady, smiling sweetly, at the same time advancing an arm-chair, into which she sunk, taking particular pains as she did so to show a tiny foot in a cherry-colored slipper, surmounted by a steel buckle that sparkled like dewdrops upon a rose leaf.

"I have called, madam," he went on, "upon business. It's always unpleasant to intrude business affairs upon a lady; but your presence at Monsieur Gerdy's private residence"—

"What?" cried Nellie, jumping up, and wheeling the chair back with a kick of her foot. "He knows, then, of my visit already. What a mean wretch he must be to keep spies about him! You're one of his spies, ain't you?"

"My dear child," expostulated Old Corkscrew.

"Oh, don't 'dear child' me!" said the young lady. "Don't be a humbug. I know what you've come about. You've been sent here by Noel to scold and preach to me; but I won't stand it, and so I tell you. Take him back my compliments, and tell him that I don't care to have a riddle for a lover—a man I know nothing about—an enigma dressed in a black coat, and got up like a mite—a being as mysterious as he is lugubrious."

"But why did you call upon him?"

"Why?" said the girl, indignantly. "Because he promised to marry me, and I've heard from a friend that he's going to jilt me."

"Who told you that?"

"That old thief, Ducroc."

"But it's not true."

"True or not, all I know is, that for the last month Noel has been a changed man."

The volunteer detective was on tenter-hooks. What he wanted to know above everything was if Noel could prove an *alibi* upon the day of the crime. That was

the question. His heart beat fast as he hazarded the next inquiry.

"You doubt his love, then?"

"Doubt his love! Ha—ha! What a funny old boy you are! Wouldn't you, if you were a woman, doubt the love of a man if he was ashamed to own you? Why he hides me as if I were some secret that couldn't bear the light of day."

She had risen in her excitement, and throwing back her magnificent black hair, turned upon the old man like a young tigress.

"You are his friend, and I appeal to you. Now listen to me. You look a sensible sort of old chap, and by that cunning old eye of yours I should think you were not to be caught with chaff."

"Not in the least," said Daddy Tabaret, bowing to the compliment and smiling his sweetest smile.

"Well, then, listen to me. I'm telling you the truth, mind you. I'd been having a row with him about his never taking me out. It was last Tuesday—Shrove Tuesday, you know."

"Yes, I know," said the old man, quietly.

"Well, he took a box at the theater, and told me to go on first, and he would join me. Not a bit of it! I never saw him the whole evening."

"What! he put you to the unpleasant inconvenience of going home alone?"

"Oh, no! At the end of the performance, towards midnight, Monsieur condescended to make his re-appearance. We were engaged to appear at the masquerade ball at the opera and afterwards to supper. Oh, how amusing it was to see Noel doing the tragic and mysterious! During the ball he wouldn't take off his cloak or mask, and kept up the nonsense till we went away."

The *alibi* prepared in case of accident appeared for the first time; and had Nellie Nicholson been less excited, she would certainly have noticed the expression of Daddy Tabaret's face, and have wisely held her tongue.

The old man had turned white to the very lips, and trembled like an aspen leaf.

"Ha! ha!" he said, making a superhuman effort to pronounce the words: "Your supper party, I suppose, was a gay affair, after all?"

"Gay?" repeated the young woman, shrugging her shoulders. "It's very plain you don't know your friend, Monsieur Noel Gerdy as well as I do. If ever you invite him to dinner, take care about allowing him to drink. He gets uproarious in his cups. At the second bottle he was drunk as a lord—so drunk that he lost all his things—great-coat, umbrella, purse, cigar-case, and—"

Daddy Tabaret could contain himself no longer. He sprang to his feet, and shook his fists in the air.

"What a villain!" he cried. "What a miserable scoundrel! I have him!—I have him now!"

And he fled from the room like a madman, leaving Nellie standing like a statue of wonder at his unaccountable behavior.

As she heard the front door bang behind him, she rushed to the bed-room, where her maid was sitting at some needle-work, and tumbling upon her knees, buried her face in the girl's lap.

"Oh, I've been doing some mischief—something dreadful—I know I have," she moaned. "That old man has been making a fool of me. I know he has! Oh, what shall I do—what shall I do?"

"Give him in charge," said the girl, promptly, whose ideas of justice and propriety were all centered in the police-court.

Her mistress didn't even hear her. She felt intuitively that a great misfortune was impending over her lover, and she was somehow mixed up in it.

"Bring me my writing desk," she said, rising to her feet. "I'm going to write to Noel, and tell him all about it."

CHAPTER XLVII.

AFTER leaving Nellie Nicholson, Old Corkscrew sprang into his cab and sped away to the Palace of Justice, wild with rage and excitement. His former love for Noel had turned to hatred. He was indignant at having been made the dupe of such a man, and muttered curses to himself that if they had been uttered aloud, might have turned even the cabman gray.

"He has not only murdered the poor Widow Lerouge," he thought, "but he has so arranged the whole thing, that he has caused an innocent man to be condemned. How do I know now that he has not even killed his own mother?"

Of one thing the old man felt certain—and that was, that it must have been in the train that the young barrister had lost the property mentioned by Nellie Nicholson. Could that property be recovered? or had he recovered it by giving a false name at the Missing Property Office at the railway station.

Just about this time the Daddy's head was going round and round. His heart was beating so fast that he felt nearly suffocated, and his clammy hands fell powerless to his side.

"Oh, Lord! oh, Lord! I'm going to have a fit!" he gasped. "And if I die in it, Noel Gerdy—whom I have made the sole heir to all my property—will escape! When a man makes a will of any importance, he ought always to carry it about with him; so that he can destroy it when he changes his mind, and make another at the earliest opportunity!"

Twenty steps further, the crimson and green lights of a chemist's shop flashed into the cab.

"Let me out! let me out!" cried the old man. "I'm choking!"

Two minutes after, he found himself in the shop, held up by the cabman, and making a wry face over the restorative the chemist had mixed for him.

An hour later, Daddy Tabaret, accompanied by a policeman, proceeded to the railway station, in search

of the missing articles mentioned by Miss Nellie Nicholson.

His researches resulted in what he had expected.

On Shrove Tuesday there had been found in a second-class carriage an overcoat and an umbrella. In the pockets of the overcoat were a pair of pearl-gray gloves, stained and torn, and a return ticket, which had not been used.

The conviction that had grown upon Old Corkscrew, in spite of himself, from the moment that the money-lender had opened his eyes to the vices of Noel, had become gradually strengthened by a thousand circumstances. Whilst speaking to Nellie Nicholson he had almost felt convinced—but now he was appalled at the overwhelming evidence that crowded upon him.

The one prevailing feeling in the old man's mind was that justice should be done. To protect the innocent and arrest the guilty had become with this strange being the instinct of his life. With the scent of the bloodhound, with him was also added its honesty.

The struggle was terrible. In his lonely life the roots of a strong affection had struck deep; and now, moved by a sense of duty, the one pervading feeling of his life, he was about to tear away this sole abiding love, that had borne to him such bitter, bitter fruit.

Allied to this came the agony of a great remorse. How much of suffering had he not occasioned by his misdirected energy? What cruel torture had he not been instrumental in inflicting upon those who, had he known them to be innocent, it would have been his "*duty*" to protect? And now, what was to be done?

A terrible question, yet one that must be swiftly decided.

It was not a matter that admitted of long reflection.

It was not a question of days, but one of hours; and the poor creature seemed to grow older, and more feeble, as the dreadful necessity for immediate action forced itself upon him.

"I dare not spare him!" he murmured, as he clasped his weary head in his hands. "No, no; though it be my death as well as his, I dare not spare him! A higher power than any will of mine tells me to speak the truth, and, like Abraham of old, even though that the sacrifice must be my adopted son, that sacrifice shall be made. Oh, Noel! Noel! other crimes only speak, but murder shrieks aloud, and must, sooner or later, call down the certain justice. And yet—and yet, I loved the boy so well!"

Time rolled on, and still the old detective was undecided how to act. He was much changed, and seemed literally to wither up before the piercing wind, as it met him round the sharp corners of the railway corridors, and seemed disposed to shake his very garments into shreds.

Poor old Daddy Tabaret! He never felt the bitterness of the wind, nor heard the mocking sneers of those he ran against, or whose progress he obstructed. A terrible—an awful struggle was taking place in the breast of that shabby-looking old man;—a struggle as heroic as any chronicled by the stylus of the Greek dramatist, for it evolved the destruction of the hope of an entire life—the tearing up of a great love—tearing it up by the roots, and leaving nothing but a crumbling emptiness behind—an emptiness that the old man knew was of the grave.

The struggle was fierce, but the decision was decisive as it was heroic; and, for the sake of others, the old man buckled himself to do his duty, and, once resolved upon his course of action, took the field at once.

Monsieur Daburon was in earnest conversation with the Count de Valcourt when this apparition appeared before him.

The door of his room was burst suddenly open, and a shriveled-up figure, with a livid face, stood upon the threshold. What a change! For a moment, even the keen eyes of the magistrate failed to recognize the features of Daddy Tabaret.

With haggard eyes, and hands upraised, he advanced upon Monsieur Daburon, without perceiving that the room had another occupant.

"Monsieur," he said, in tones so unusually impressive that the magistrate, though accustomed to these sudden inroads on the part of his eccentric friend, pushed back his chair, and regarded him with surprise—"Monsieur, at last I am not deceived! Don't speak!—don't speak! Alas! there is no longer room for doubt, and the murderer is found!"

"Found?"

"Don't speak!—don't speak, or I shall break down! In mercy to me, let me get through the task I have set myself to do! The man—the assassin, is—is!" he paused for a second, then blurted out, with a something between a gasp and a groan—"the son of my adoption, the child of my heart—NOEL GERDY!"

The words were scarcely pronounced when both started. The door by which Daddy Tabaret had entered, and had left open, was closed suddenly. The Count de Valcourt had glided from the room.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

To use a common phrase, Noel had promised to move heaven and earth to obtain the release of Albert; and he really and truly had visited several members of the bar; but had placed the case in such a peculiar point of view, that they one and all refused him their aid.

At four o'clock he called at the Count de Valcourt's house, to apprise his father of his non-success.

"The Count is out," said the valet; "but if you wouldn't mind waiting, monsieur, he will return very shortly."

"I'll wait," said the barrister.

"The Count expected monsieur," said the valet, bowing respectfully, "and gave orders that if you called, you were to be shown into the study."

Noel's heart swelled with pride. For the future, he was master in this magnificent house—the heir to all the lands of the ancient family, whose name he bore—

As he looked around with a glance of pride, his eye fell upon the genealogical tree that, surrounded by a magnificent frame, hung over the chimney-piece. He advanced, and studied it, and saw the names of the greatest families in France allied with that of the De Valcourts. Two of them had espoused the younger daughters of kings; and as he read, the heart of the barrister beat high with pride, whilst he murmured to himself, "And I—I am now Viscount de Valcourt!"

As he spoke the words, the door behind him was thrust open, and the old Count entered, closing it quickly behind him.

Noel was advancing towards him with outstretched hands; but recoiled at the look of rage and scorn that flashed from his father's eyes.

That look made him shudder from head to foot. It was as much as he could do to stand upright. He knew that he was lost.

"Oh, you villain!" cried the old man, shaking his clenched fist at him; and then, as if afraid of his own anger, throwing his stick to the other end of the room. "I can't strike him," he murmured—"I can't strike him! He isn't worthy of the rage of a man like me!"

Then there was a silence—a silence so intense that the ticking of the tiny ormolu clock on the chimney-piece sounded like a death-watch in the room.

In those few moments "oceans of memory" seemed to roll over their souls, and for the time being to annihilate all thought.

The young man was the first to speak.

"Father"—he commenced.

"Silence!" said the Count, in a hollow voice, "Don't speak! I can't bear to hear your voice. I know that you are my son, and I know that you have broken poor Valerie's heart." Here the old man advanced towards him, and looking him full in the eyes, cried out, "Parricide! you have killed your mother! I saw her this morning. She wasn't delirious then, and when you entered the room as she was breathing her last, with her dying words she denounced you as a murderer!"

Step by step, Noel had recoiled to the other end of the room, and now leant against the wall, with a pale face and haggard eyes, trembling from head to foot.

"I know everything!" pursued the Count. "And, what is worse still, I am not alone in my knowledge. At this very moment a summons has been issued for your arrest."

A cry, half of rage, half of despair, broke from the barrister's lips.

Thunderstruck at the very moment of expected triumph, he gathered himself together, and stood at bay, determined to fight out the fight to its bitter end.

The Count de Valcourt, without appearing to be conscious of the presence of Noel, went to his study-table, and opened a drawer.

"Sit down," he said sternly, "and write the confession of your crime! You will find a pistol in this drawer that I have just opened, and may Heaven have mercy upon your soul!"

The old gentleman made a movement, as to leave; but Noel stopped him by a gesture, taking a revolver from his pocket as he did so.

"You see, I require no aid of this sort," he said. "My precautions, as you will perceive, are already taken. I promise you I shall never be taken alive—only I make this proviso."

"Oh, there's a proviso, is there?" interrogated the Count, sternly.

"Yes," answered the barrister, in accents as cold and stern as the question. "I am young, and you are old. The fact is, life is pleasant to me, and, to sum it all up in a few words, I don't want to die!"

"What!" cried the old Count, recoiling, and in a tone of disgust. "You don't mean to say you are a coward?"

"No, monsieur, I'm not a coward; but I'll not put an end to my existence until I am perfectly assured that every loophole is closed to me, and that escape is impossible."

His father rushed towards his study-table to the drawer that contained the loaded pistol, but, foreseeing the movement, Noel closed it with a backward movement of his hand, and placed himself before it.

"Listen to me!" said the barrister, in those hoarse, short tones that are only used when we feel ourselves in imminent danger—"listen to me! Don't let us waste, in vain and idle reproaches, the few minutes of explanation that are left me. As I have said before, the idea of death is a horror to me. Give me the means I speak of in a pecuniary point of view, and I swear to you I will escape; and, if I fail, I swear to you as solemnly that I will not be taken alive!"

For a moment—but a moment only—the old nobleman stood undecided. The thought of the scandal and the shame, in which he had been a participator, weighed too heavily in the balance. He was frightened at the very idea of publicity, and if his whole fortune had been at his feet at the moment, he would have given it to the unfortunate man before him. Luckily, on the Saturday he had drawn from his banker's a large sum of money, destined for the furnishing of the house of his newly-found son.

Without speaking a word the Count opened a little iron safe fixed on the wall, and taking from it a bundle of bank-notes, threw them at Noel's feet; then, falling upon his knees beside the sofa, he buried his gray head in the cushions, and burst into a violent fit of sobbing. When he looked up again, the room was empty. Noel was gone.

An hour later, the servants found their master face downwards upon the carpet, to all appearances lifeless.

CHAPTER XLXI.

NOEL, on leaving his father's house, walked up the street reeling like a drunken man. It seemed to him that the very pavement oscillated beneath his feet, and that the houses and people round him were whirling

round and round in a sort of mad waltz. His mouth was parched and dry, his eyes smarted as though he had been weeping, and every now and then he felt so sick that he was forced to lean for support against some doorway or lamp-post; but at the same time, strangely enough, he felt a sort of relief.

Everything was known—finished—over! He had played his game, and had lost! No more anguish now. All was ended—the fear—the hope—the horrible suspense. He had played his terrible part out, and could now take off his mask, and once more breathe at ease.

An overwhelming and irresistible sinking of the spirits succeeded the nervous excitement which had supported him since the day of the murder. The burning fever which for the last eight days had galvanized him into an unnatural sort of life had left him, and he felt an imperious desire for rest and quiet, accompanied at the same time by an aching void and an indifference for everything that took place around him.

This insensibility upon his part resembled that of persons overwhelmed by sea-sickness, whom nothing affects—to whom all things are perfectly indifferent—who have neither the strength or the courage to think, and whom the imminence of a great danger—nay, even death itself—cannot rouse from their sad dejection.

If he had been arrested whilst in this frame of mind he would not even have attempted a denial, but would have yielded without a murmur.

At last, after wandering through the Paris streets without any aim or end in view, a reaction came against this weakness and exhaustion of mind and body. A vivid consciousness of his fearful situation and the imminence of his danger rushed back on his memory, and the thought of the scaffold came across him as when in a flash of lightning one sees a fearful abyss yawning at one's feet.

Little by little night had crept on, and, with the darkness, Noel felt a return of his old courage and audacity.

"I have money," he thought. "I'll go to America—I'll change my name—I'll commence a new life; and, with my energy and abilities, it will be my own fault if I don't make a fortune! I've ready money, and that, after all, is the principal thing. Besides, I can always draw upon my father. He hates publicity, and the honor of the family must be maintained at any price!"

He laughed a bitter laugh at this last reflection, when suddenly the thought of Nellie Nicholson darted across his mind. Was he to leave without her?—never to see her again?—never to speak to her more? What! was he to fly, like a hunted beast, before the police, and she remain in Paris, in comfort and luxury?—she, for whom he had sinned?—she, for whom he had committed the crime? Who had reaped the benefit? Nellie, and Nellie alone; and wasn't it just that she should take her part in his punishment?

"I know she doesn't love me!" thought the barrister, bitterly. "I don't think she ever loved me! I have sometimes thought she would be glad to get rid of me! I don't think she would even shed a tear when she hears of my ruin! She told me one day, when I was hard up, that an empty purse was a useless thing, and only fit to be thrown behind the fire! Rich with my spoil, she'll make a capital marriage; and, before a week is over, I shall be forgotten! She will live a prosperous and a happy life: whilst I"—

The voice of Prudence warned him to forget Nellie, as he had prophesied she would forget him; but the voice of Passion answered, "What matters? Let us live or perish together. If she does not love me, I love her, and come with me she shall and must!"

But how was he to see Nellie—to speak to her—to argue her over into seeing things according to his point of view? If he went to her at her own house, he might find the police there already. "Yet, no," thought Noel; "nobody knows that I've made such a fool of myself with her. None of my friends are aware that I even visit her; and, if I wrote, it would be more dangerous still."

He walked on till he came to a cab-stand; and, getting into a four-wheeler, gave the number of the house in the Rue de Provence, that street which had already been so fatal to him.

Crouching back in the corner of the cab, half giddy with its rumbling and jolting, Noel forgot all about the future; the present became a blank. Even Nellie was forgotten. His past rose before him; and like a spectator at a theater, he reviewed the tragedy of his own life.

He saw how his love for Nellie Nicholson had lured him into debt. He saw himself on the brink of ruin, when a chance made him the possessor of the private correspondence of the Count de Valcourt—not only of the letters read by Daddy Tabaret, and communicated to Albert, but of others still, when the Count thought the substitution had been accomplished, and all fear of detection at an end.

The reading of these letters had turned his head. He felt delirious with excitement and joy. But he was soon awakened from his brief day-dream by his mother. She told him the truth—proved it to him by letters written to her by the Widow Lerouge—made him call on Claudine, who corroborated his mother's assertions, and showed him the scar which her husband had made on the memorable night at the village inn.

But a drowning man does not choose the plank that is to save him. Noel determined to use the letters, and to exert his influence over his mother to write to the Count, and swear to him that the substitution had really taken place.

This proposition his mother repudiated with horror—and it was then that the thought of the murder entered his mind.

The unhappy man was stopped in his retrospective review by the sudden pulling up of the cab, which had arrived at its destination.

Letting down the front window, he thrust some sil-

ver into the driver's hand, opened the door himself, and was up the stairs before the man had time to turn his head.

Jeannette, the maid, gave a little scream of joy when she saw him.

"Oh, it is you, Monsieur! Won't Madame be pleased! She's been so uneasy about you!"

Nellie uneasy—and what for?

The barrister, however, never thought of questioning the girl. It seemed that in passing that threshold he had suddenly recovered all his calmness and presence of mind. He was measuring the imprudence of his visit, and felt that minutes, even moments, wasted were a matter of life and death to him.

"If any one calls," he said to Jeannette, "say that your mistress is out—say anything; but, as you value your place, don't admit a mortal soul. So, to your work, and hold your tongue."

At the voice of Noel, Nellie ran into the hall. He pushed her back into the dining-room, and, following, closed the door behind him. It was then, and then only, that the girl saw the face of her lover.

How changed it was! How pale! How haggard!

"What's happened?" she gasped.

Noel made no answer. He had sunk into a chair, and was wiping his forehead and hands with his pocket handkerchief.

"For heaven's sake, speak!" said Nellie. "You are as white as a ghost! You are ill! Let me call Jeannette."

Springing to his feet, he caught her by the hands.

"Nellie," he asked, in a hoarse voice, fixing on her his haggard, bloodshot eyes—"Nellie, be sincere. Speak the truth. Do you love me?"

She divined—she felt that something extraordinary had happened, and that some great misfortune was pending; yet, with the extraordinary triviality that sometimes possesses her sex, she commenced coquetting with him.

"You naughty fellow," she said, "you are fishing for compliments, and if you think you'll fish any out of me, you'll find yourself in the wrong boat."

"Stop!" interrupted Noel, stamping his foot violently upon the ground. "I've asked you a simple question; can't you give me an answer?"

And, as he spoke, he seized the tiny, dimpled hands of Nellie, and pressed them between his own till she winced with pain.

"Yes or no—do you love me?"

A hundred times she had played with the passionate temper of her lover, amusing herself with exciting him into a rage, and equally amused at patting and smoothing him down again into a placid and happy frame of mind.

But she was frightened now. She had never seen him like this. Something dreadful must have happened.

"Of course! You know I love you," she stammered. "Haven't I proved it to you? Why do you ask me?"

"Why?" answered the barrister, throwing the girl's hands from him. "What I mean is this—that if you love me, it is now necessary you should prove it. Follow me on the instant—this moment—now! Throw up everything—quit everything—this moment—do you hear?"

The girl was white to her very lips. She had never been so afraid in her life.

"You frighten me, Noel. What is it? What do you mean?"

He burst into a strident laugh.

"That I have been a fool, and have loved you too much! Yes, my love for you, Nellie, has been my ruin. The day that saw me without money sufficient to supply your luxuries, and indulge your caprice, I ceased to be an honest man! For your sake I have committed a crime—a terrible one! The officers of justice are now on my track! If there be any truth in the oath you have so often sworn, come with me. Five minutes delay means death!"

Nellie looked at him in wide eyed astonishment.

"Crime! You have committed a crime for me?"

"Murder, that's all," he said, with a sort of stolid indifference.

"For me?" she repeated "for me?"

"For whom else? It was my mad love that did it all. But for my madness, frenzy—call it what you will—my hands would still be as white as yours. You do not answer. Well, it is but the completion of my love's mad folly to believe in the possibility of a woman's gratitude."

He turned towards the door, when, with a cry and a bound like a young panther's, she was upon him.

Her arms thrown around his neck, her hands tightly clasped, her lips touching his, her wild eyes fixed on his.

"I love you," she murmured. Then throwing back her head, but without releasing her hold, she continued to speak rapidly, her voice rising to a scream—"yes, I love you, Noel. You are in danger of your life—you are hunted, tracked, and all for me—for me! I never believed in man before—never thought that you, of all men, were capable of this. Quick—quick! Take me with you? It shall be sacrifice for sacrifice, and we will never—never be parted more!"

Then, for the first time releasing him, she, with all the wild energy of her ill-regulated, half-feline nature, dashed at a splendid buhl cabinet, tore open the door, and began to drag out lace and jewels, and cram them into a small valise which was ready to hand.

Suddenly the valise dropped from her grasp, and a groan burst from the breast of her miserable and desperate lover.

A loud ringing of the door-bell pealed through the apartment.

It sounded to both what it was—the knell of approaching doom!

"My God!" and the barrister turned his haggard eyes everywhere about him, as seeking some means of escape—"they are here."

They stood together, these two unfortunates—the woman tightly clinging to the man; the man lost, utterly lost, in the knowledge of the immensity of his danger.

Again that awful bell—terrible as the one that startled the ears of Scotland's murderous thane—rang out its ghastly summons.

"Come!" it seemed to say; "come, murderer and forger, come! The hounds of justice have run you down! Open, in the name of the law!"

"I am lost!" gasped the terrified young barrister.

"Hush!"

It was Jeannette who now appeared on the threshold of the door of communication between the rooms. She, too, was deathly pale, but her movements were quick and decided, her finger pressed warningly to her lip.

"The back staircase is occupied by the police. Listen! They are breaking in the door!"

And, sure enough, the crash of heavy shoulders against the panels of both doors resounded through the house. There was a sharp cracking of the wood-work; but as yet the timbers held strongly together.

"Open, in the name of the law!"

With simultaneous action, urged by the same fears, the women rushed one to the front; the other to the back entrance door.

"There are the back stairs! Quick—quick! There is no time to be lost!"

"They are breaking in the door!" cried Nellie. "We must not lose a moment! Quick!"

She darted forward in advance of Noel, to return with a face of ghastly terror, but too faithfully reflected in the faces of her master and mistress, for in the girl's face they read that hope was not for them.

"The window—the window!" cried Nellie, as she passed out. "They shall pass over my body, Noel, before they reach you!"

The window was three stories from the ground.

The barrister, pale and rigid as any corpse, stood erect and motionless in the centre of the apartment—that apartment which had been the scene of so many sinful pleasures, and which was now to see their bitter—bitter expiation!"

He was at bay—nay, worse than at bay, and the very hopelessness of his position, the impossibility of escape, brought back a gleam of courage to his aching heart.

With a smile upon the white lips—terribly suggestive of the very opposite of mirth—he drew a three-chambered revolver from his breast-pocket.

"I've given my word," he said; "let me at least for once keep faith. I swore I would not be taken alive."

He raised the pistol to the region of the heart as Nellie Nicholson, throwing herself upon him, strove to arrest his hand.

"Too late!"

The heart was not touched, but the shot was mortal.

At the same moment one of the outer doors, or both, gave way with a crash, and the police, in a body, entered the room.

"A doctor—a doctor!" implored the half-frantic woman.

And, at a gesture of Daddy Tabaret, who was in among the first, several of the men disappeared.

"A doctor for me!" groaned the dying man, with something of the old irony in his tone. "Send for a sexton to dig a grave as deep as a man's despair, and let a mason carve this epitaph:

"KILLED FROM LOVE FOR A WOMAN."

No answer came from Nellie. She had fainted in the arms of Jeannette.

They lifted him gently enough under the direction of Daddy Tabaret, on the bed.

"Give me some paper while yet I have strength."

The old detective placed the writing materials in his hands.

"Write—for it is you must write, and I will sign—that I murdered the Widow Lerouge. Such a confession costs me but little now, yet it will give some relief to my brother. It is a family debt, to keep, at least, one name clear. I owe him that."

He signed the paper, which the old detective carried to the table, wishing, according to his habit, to "verify" and make "all right" in the middle of his grief.

The dying Noel grasped the hand of the sobbing Nellie, now recovered from her fainting, and whispered hurriedly in her ear, as he convulsively dragged her face down till it touched his own, "Nell, my money—and, properly managed, it's a fortune—is under my pillow; so that's why I asked them to lift me on the bed. Take it—don't hesitate, my girl! I know too well what the horrible temptations of poverty are! Take it—it's yours!"

Though weeping, and still loving the dying man, she, with the true instinct of her kind, secured the pocket-book, even though her pretty head was resting, and without hypocrisy, upon the dying man's bosom.

Dying? He was dead! With a last fond, eager gaze upon the face—the poor, lost, beautiful face of the woman he had so madly loved—the spirit of Noel Gerdy passed away, to be judged, let us hope, when all are weighed in an equal balance, with a greater charity than he can meet with on earth!

"It was the best end after all!" said old Tabaret, who had again approached the bed, and now stood, with two big tears trickling down his cheeks. "It satisfies all parties! And what a lesson!" he continued, shaking his head gravely, to himself—"what a lesson! to prove that a desperate fortune was never yet retrieved by a yet more desperate deed!"

THE END.

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